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KING OF KILBA

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "Nameless Island," "Winning His Wings,"
"Mystery Ship," etc., etc.

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KING OF KILBA

CHAPTER I

A CLEAN CUT

“**P**AY Kenneth Kilsyth, Esq., or Order the sum of One Thousand Pounds Sterling.”

Ken looked dazedly at the pink slip he held in his hand. The surprise left him speechless. He could hardly collect his thoughts. Surely this was a mistake, or was he dreaming? There was his name, right enough, but were there two Kenneth Kilsyths? And what possessed two entire strangers—their names appeared on the cheque—to take it into their heads to give him a thousand of the best? Perhaps it was a hoax; but who would run the risk of making out a bogus cheque simply for the sake of playing a prank?

Still bewildered, Ken stooped to pick up the envelope that had fallen unheeded to the floor. In his excitement he had extracted the pink slip and had overlooked a folded sheet of type-written words.

“DEAR SIR,” he read, “We have much pleasure in informing you of your success in our third

Football Competition, and herewith enclose our cheque for One Thousand Pounds. An acknowledgment at your earliest convenience will oblige."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Kenneth. "So it's that, is it? One thousand pounds! You've done it on me this time, young fellah me lad!"

He had almost forgotten the competition. Three weeks ago he had filled in a coupon from a well-known journal. He hardly knew why he had done so. He had acted on the spur of the moment and had not even troubled to make a copy of his forecast. For a total outlay of threepence-halfpenny he had raked in a cool thousand pounds.

Kenneth Kilsyth was a tall, well-knit lad of sixteen. Only a few months ago he had left school and had been pitchforked into the counting-house of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett—pitchforked into it because he had little or no choice in the matter. He had lost both parents when he was seven. Since then he had been "brought up" under the care of an uncle—his sole relative—whose one idea seemed to be that of getting Kenneth off his hands at the earliest possible moment and with the least trouble to himself.

Ken had finally left school on a Friday afternoon. On the following Monday he found himself on a high stool in the dingy, comfortless, ill-ventilated office of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett in the company of half a dozen pale-faced, weedy-

looking men and youths. Here he was expected to "slog away" for nine solid hours a day with the ultimate prospect of spending forty-five years of unprofitable and thankless clerical work, and of then "retiring" with a meagre pittance which the principals grandiloquently called a superannuation pension. Also, he had been informed by the head clerk that he would be granted as a privilege, but not a right, seven days' leave per annum with full pay.

To a lad who for two years in succession had held the honour of being champion athlete of the school, office work was not only drudgery, it was a calamity. In vain Kenneth had asked his legal guardian to let him join either the Navy or the Army. He was the sort of youth who would quickly be "earmarked" for promotion. But Mr. Kilsyth was inflexible in his refusals, and since his nephew knew that "running away to sea" isn't done nowadays, and that the Army won't accept recruits under age without the written permission of their parents or guardians, Ken realized that he was "up against it." Nevertheless he quickly made up his mind not to remain with Messrs. Grabaul and Gett a day longer than he could help—but when would the opportunity arrive?

"A thousand pounds!" The words kept hammering in his brain. A thousand pounds! That meant little as wealth, but it did mean a key to unlock the door of the prison—the hateful counting house of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett.

Yes, he would lose no time in severing his humble connection with that firm.

Folding the cheque and placing it in his pocket-book, Kenneth devoted his immediate attention to breakfast. Watery coffee and a meagre dish of bacon and eggs had stood cooling on the none too clean tablecloth for the last twenty minutes. It was now nine o'clock, and at that hour the lad ought to have been seated on the high office-stool. Half an hour ago the thought of being late would have appalled him; now he contemplated the prospect of an interview with the sombre-featured head clerk with the utmost composure.

Kenneth was "in digs.," occupying a bed-sitting room in a small house within a few minutes of the office. It was the best he could afford, and even then there was very little left out of his weekly "salary" when Mrs. Havingham's bill was settled.

Through the grimy fly-blown window he could see the factory chimney belching out columns of black smoke. A dingy mist hung over the busy manufacturing town. The outlook was grey and depressing. Hardly any foliage was to be seen, for even the leaves of the stunted trees seemed wilted in the moist, sunless, unwholesome atmosphere of the valley in which the town lay.

For the best part of a long winter Kenneth had stuck it. With the exception of a vigorous tramp into the country once a week, he had had

no opportunity of enjoying the pure open air; and for a youth accustomed to outdoor sports and recreation the ill-ventilated counting-house was little better than a prison.

His colleagues seemed thoroughly acclimatized to the sort of existence. Without ambitions, careless as to their health, they appeared to possess the docility of sheep in spite of constant bickerings and petty jealousies.

There was one exception. That was Gerald Hayes, a lad of Kenneth's age and having much in common with him. Gerald, too, was without parents living. His father had been killed in the Great War, and the shock of her husband's loss had resulted in Mrs. Hayes' death. Their son, after being educated at the expense of the Officers' Families Association, had been placed willy-nilly in Messrs. Grabaul and Gett's office to shift for himself.

The first shock of this pleasant surprise having worn off, Kenneth proceeded to make a leisurely breakfast. Already he was beginning to realize that with a thousand pounds behind him the fact that the head clerk would storm and rave at his tardy arrival would be like water on a duck's back. While he was about it, decided the lad, he might just as well go the whole hog, and enjoy the discomfiture of the sarcastic and taciturn Mr. Gurgle.

Before he had finished his meal Kenneth was not surprised to see Mrs. Havingham come into the room.

"Ain't you well, Mr. Kilsyth?" she inquired.

"Quite, thanks," replied Kenneth. "At least, I believe so."

"Thought as you weren't, seeing as you're late," continued his landlady. "Whenever Mr. Blake—'im as 'ad these rooms before you—was late, 'e'd send a telegram saying as 'e was indisposed. I just mention this in case——"

"No need," rejoined Ken. "And by the by, Mrs. Havingham, I wish to give up this room in a week's time."

"Well now, sir!" exclaimed the astonished woman, "I never did! It weren't my fault if that there egg weren't up to sample——"

"I haven't noticed it," declared Kenneth. "In any case, that's not the reason. As a matter of fact, I'm leaving Grabaul and Gett's. Has the morning paper come yet?"

Too taken aback to press for further information, Mrs. Havingham fetched the paper for her "paying guest" and retired to inform the "first floor front" that young Mr. Kilsyth must be going off his head.

The reading of the paper occupied Ken to a quarter to ten. Then, pulling on boots, hat and overcoat, he made his way to a bank in the High Street, arriving there just as the front doors were opened.

"I wish to open an account," he announced calmly.

"Certainly, sir. Deposit or current?"

"Current," decided Ken, and endorsing the

cheque handed it to the somewhat suspicious cashier. Then, having complied with the usual formalities and with a cheque-book in his possession, Kenneth strolled out with the assurance of a man of substance.

His sense of elation returned with redoubled force as he entered the dingy portals of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett's office. In the lobby was the attendance book. Underneath the last line had been ruled a thick black line—the metaphorical barrier between the sheep and the goats. Ken signed his name and walked into the counting-house. Every clerk raised his eyes to gaze—first at the late-comer and then at the clock. Mr. Gurgle, the head clerk, slid ponderously from his seat and came over to Ken's desk.

"One hour and twenty minutes late," he announced sombrely. "I must report you to the heads."

Ken knew perfectly well that even had he been only a minute late, Gurgle would have reported the matter. The head clerk never troubled to inquire the reason for his tardy appearance. Kenneth and several of the juniors were invariably in Gurgle's black books. Others could be late with considerable frequency; but "standing in" with the head clerk could avoid the indignity and discomfiture of being "on the carpet."

"Don't trouble," rejoined the lad, with a cheerful smile.

"But I will," snapped Gurgle. "You'll be

reported. You're insolent. This will be a sack-ing business."

"That's a fact," agreed Ken. "But I won't be the one to be sacked. I've just learnt an important bit of news——"

The head clerk started. Not only was he a bully by virtue of his position; he was involved in more than one shady transaction. His guilty conscience immediately led him to believe that the junior had by some means become acquainted with one of his lapses.

"We'll say no more about it, Kilsyth," he said hurriedly, and in a low voice. "I expect——"

"Is Mr. Grabaul in his room?" interrupted Kenneth firmly. "Oh, very well, I'll see him. You needn't announce me."

Mr. Gurgle was thunderstruck. It had been his invariable practice for obvious reasons never to allow a subordinate to seek an interview with the principals, unless he were present. He was about to demur, when Kenneth took the wind out of his sails by going to the door of the chief's private sanctum and rapping upon the glass panel.

"Come in!" exclaimed a high-pitched voice.

Kenneth did so, and took up his stand on a carpet in front of Mr. Grabaul's knee-hole desk.

The principal gave him one quick glance and, recognizing that the arrival was not a client, affected to ignore the very junior member of his staff.

realized there was little likelihood of getting even the equivalent to the youth's wages if he were compelled to complete the customary period following his formal notice.

"You can go," he said.

CHAPTER II

PESTILENCE AND STORM

KENNETH had not exaggerated when he informed his employer that his plans were already laid. They were—in a rough state. Elaboration would come later. Meanwhile, having cut himself off from the hitherto unbreakable bond that kept him a prisoner in the counting-house of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett, he could go full speed ahead and trust to his natural sagacity and energy, backed by a capital of one thousand pounds to win through.

The head clerk gave Kilsyth a searching look, as he came out of the principal's sanctum. The other clerks made no effort to conceal their curiosity. But Kenneth's face did not look as if he had had a "telling-off" as he went quietly to his desk to collect a few personal belongings.

Then he went across to his chum Hayes.

"Look me up this evening, old man," he said in a low voice.

"Right-o!" agreed Gerald, "what—off?"

"Rather!"

"For good?"

"Yes."

"You've got the sack? I'm sorry."

"I'm glad," declared Ken with complete conviction. "Tell you all about it later. Cheerio!"

Passing through the dismal portals of Messrs. Grabual and Gett's office for the last time, Ken squared his shoulders and took a deep breath.

"Well, that's done it this time!" he soliloquized. "I wonder how it will pan out?"

He had no intention of returning to his room until teatime. He wanted to go out into the open country and think—to elaborate his general plans.

One thing was settled. He would leave England, but he had to make up his mind where to go and what to do when he got there. He rather fancied New Zealand. He remembered in his early youth the tall, supple-limbed men who came from "down under" to take part in a wide-world upheaval. There had been thousands of them quartered in huts close to the house his parents lived in. Well-spoken, cheerful, healthy-looking fellows those New Zealanders, although Ken couldn't understand why they called each other by the somewhat gruesome name of "Digger." In his mind, he linked the word with a churchyard. Australia and Canada also appealed to him, and he was rather keen to see life in the Malay States. Possibly he might see an opening on a rubber plantation. At any rate he decided that wherever he remained he would not attempt to start on his own account. He was prudent enough to realize that the best thing to be done was to find a berth and stick to it until he had time to look round.

At six o'clock Gerald Hayes came round, bubbling with excitement.

"Found a better job, old son?" he asked.

"No," replied Kilsyth, "I haven't. I don't intend to look for one at present. Do you remember I told you I'd sent in a football coupon?"

"You did, and from what you told me, you hadn't an earthly," said Hayes with characteristic candour.

"Well, you're wrong," rejoined Ken. "It was quite correct."

"You haven't chucked your hand in on the strength of that, have you?" asked his chum anxiously. "There may be hundreds sharing, and you might only get a few shillings."

"Wrong again," declared Kilsyth. "It's a cool thousand, and what's more I've had the cheque."

"You lucky blighter!" exclaimed Gerald.

"I hope I am," replied Ken. "Well, look here, old man, I didn't get you round here to be told I'm a lucky blighter. The point's this: I'm off abroad as soon as I can, and you're coming with me, my festive."

Gerald raised his eyebrows.

"I say, rather taking things for granted, isn't it? How could I? I haven't raked in a thousand quid. In fact, I don't think I could raise enough to pay my fare to Liverpool."

"You aren't asked to," replied his chum.

"This is my show and it's up to you to cotton

on to it. I'll be frightfully disappointed if you won't. No, don't chip in yet ; wait till I've told you my plan. I'll stand all exes, they won't come to more than two hundred, 'cause we're not travelling first class. That'll get us to New Zealand, although I don't mean to go direct. When we arrive we'll take on a job on a farm to get experience. Then, with luck, we ought to start on our own in a couple of years, and by that time we should have saved enough to make up the original capital."

Gerald Hayes, although fired by his friend's enthusiasm, was of a cautious nature. Besides, he did not like the idea of sponging on his chum—for he regarded the suggestion in that light. He said so.

"Rot!" objected Ken, "I want a pal. What's more, I want you. It would be horribly lonesome going alone. Now, say you're willing. Send in your resignation to-morrow, and ask Grabaul to let you clear out as soon as possible. I mean it. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," agreed Hayes. "All right; it's a deal."

Three weeks later the two chums found themselves at Vancouver. They had landed at Montreal and had crossed the Dominion by rail. Ken had decided that Canada wasn't to be his future home. ~~It~~ It was all right, he decided, up to a certain point; but he had no liking for a Canadian winter. He wanted somewhere

where frost and snow were practically unknown.

On making inquiries at a Travel Bureau, Ken discovered that he could book a passage on a cargo-boat bound for Singapore, and thence take a liner to Auckland at a total cost of only a few pounds more than if he had booked direct.

"I always wanted to see the Malay States," he told his chum. "'Tany rate, we'll have a run for our money, and it will be a jolly sight more exciting on a tramp than on a posh liner."

It was—although in a very different sense to what Kilsyth had intended.

The S.S. *Mumtaz* was by no means a large craft. In fact she was just under 3,000 tons, with a speed of eleven knots. There was accommodation for eight passengers, but Ken and Gerald found that they were the only ones.

The run to Honolulu was pleasant but uneventful. Calm seas and a steadily rising temperature combined to make life on board enjoyable. To an experienced traveller it would have been monotonous, but to the two chums everything was so unusual that their youthful spirits revelled in the novel situation of being on a ship and at liberty to go wherever they liked. On a liner such liberty would be out of the question. On the S.S. *Mumtaz* there were no irritating restrictions. There wasn't a part of the ship which they couldn't explore.

Ten days after leaving Honolulu the wireless operator was taken ill. On the following day

the third officer and four of the hands were down, suffering from similar symptoms which baffled the skill of the experienced captain to diagnose. The following morning eight deck hands and four of the engine-room staff were in their bunks stricken by the same mysterious disease, while before the afternoon the wireless officer and three men were dead.

Although the Old Man kept a brave face it was evident that he was seriously worried over the business. Not only was the efficiency of the ship greatly impaired—for there were not sufficient hands to maintain the proper watches—but the terrible and mysterious nature of the malady coupled with the fact that the number of cases was increasing daily pointed to the presence of a dangerous epidemic.

"It beats me," confided Captain Kent to the chief officer. "We can't wireless for assistance. I don't understand the gadget, and I don't suppose you or anyone else on board does. We'll have to speak to the first vessel we fall in with and signal for medical aid."

"Sooner the better, sir," replied the chief. "I don't like to have to mention it, sir, but I'm feeling a bit off colour myself."

"Don't say you're going on the sick list, Melton," exclaimed the Old Man. "McTavish has just reported himself unfit for duty, and I doubt whether there are men enough to keep a full head of steam."

McTavish was the chief engineer. Already

two of the engineers were down, together with more than two-thirds of the firemen. Six shotted hammocks had been launched over the side that morning and there were indications that before long other sufferers would succumb.

Before sunset the chief officer was down. To make matters worse there were indications of a heavy storm—the tail end of a typhoon. Not a single sail had been sighted. The S.S. *Mumtaz*, short-handed and beset by pestilence, was in no fit state to battle with the approaching storm.

“Like as not a capful of wind’ll blow this cursed poison out of the old hooker,” remarked Captain Kent to the quartermaster. Then catching sight of Ken and Gerald he beckoned to them.

“We’re short-handed, as you know,” he said. “You’ll both have to bear a hand.”

“We would have offered to do so long ago,” replied Kilsyth, “only, you see, we don’t know much about a ship.”

“A willing heart goes a long way,” rejoined the Old Man, with a flash of enthusiasm. “On the bridge with you! There’ll be oilskin coats in the charthouse and you’ll need ’em before long.”

The chums scaled the brass-treaded ladder and gained their elevated post. Their duty, they discovered, was to relieve the helmsman until the actual breaking of the storm. The grizzled quartermaster showed them how to keep the vessel on her course and a few minutes’

practice enabled both lads to steer by keeping the lubber's-line "on" with the given compass-point.

Meanwhile six dispirited hands were going about on deck securing boats and placing additional lashings on the tarpaulins over the hatches. Twelve feet below the waterline five exhausted firemen under orders of a junior engineer were doing their utmost to feed the hungry furnaces.

There was no wind. Sea and sky were of the same leaden-coloured hue save where vivid flashes of sheet-lightning flared above the western horizon. A sullen silence brooded over everything except for the clank of the stern steering gear and the muffled throb of the propeller-shaft as the old *Mumtaz*, her speed reduced to a bare eight knots, flogged her way through the ominously placid sea.

"Glass is down to twenty-eight point two, sir," reported the quartermaster.

Captain Kent shrugged his shoulders. In other circumstances he would have received the news without emotion. Handicapped by the sorely diminished numbers of his crew—numbers that were still falling—he realized that the position was a hazardous one. He had done all he could to safeguard his ship. He had altered her course to get away as far as possible from that danger zone, the storm centre. Provided the engine-room staff could maintain a sufficient head of steam, the old *Mumtaz* might win through.

With feelings akin to awe, Ken watched the

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approach of the storm. For the first time he realized the tremendous force of Nature and compared the size of the ship with the immensity of the trackless ocean. For more than a week not another sail had been sighted, yet in the voyage across the Atlantic, vessels had been seen almost every hour of the day.

Suddenly rain began to fall—drops as large as half-crowns. Still there was no wind. The downpour increased to a veritable deluge, so that the deck was invisible by reason of the rebounding drops and the terrific fall of hissing, blinding rain.

Of the six deck hands who had been ordered to the bridge four responded to the call. One promptly fell writhing and groaning at the head of the bridge-ladder. The Old Man, the quartermaster, three seamen and Kenneth and Gerald alone remained other than the handful of firemen sticking gamely to their posts in the stifling heat below.

Presently above the machine-gun-like rattle of the raindrops came a shrill shriek. The Old Man signed to the quartermaster to "take on" and relieve Gerald at the wheel.

"Hang on to something solid like blue blazes!" shouted the quartermaster as he unceremoniously pushed Hayes aside.

The next instant the full fury of the first blast struck the ship. Her head fell off. A smother of white foam surged over the waist, the spin-drift flying completely over the bridge. With

the helm hard to lee'ard the old tramp battled desperately to come up head to wind. Rolling like a barrel she lay in the trough of the rapidly rising sea until during a temporary lull she came up on her former course.

Of what happened next Ken had but a very hazy notion. He was dimly aware of hanging on like grim death to the stanchion rail and keeping his head well down to dodge the shrieking wind. In the almost incessant glare of the lightning he could see the flooded well-deck and beyond the fo'c'sle alternately burying itself in the mountainous waves or tossed high in the air as the vessel heaved and pitched. The racket was deafening, the shrieking and howling of the wind almost outvoicing the crash of the thunder.

Once he turned his head to see what his chum was doing. He was reassured on that point, but the wind getting under the brim of his sou'wester, dealt him such a buffet that for the moment he imagined that his neck was twisted. After that he kept his head well down, although the rattle of the rain upon the stiff oiled canvas of his head-dress was like a succession of blows from a light stick.

Then one of the foremast derricks was carried away. Even with a full complement it would have been a difficult matter to secure it. In the circumstances nothing could be done. It was beyond the task of the mere remnant of enfeebled men to tackle. At every roll of the ship the huge steel boom was flung from side to

side, demolishing everything in its mad career until buckling against a cargo-winch it snapped off short and disappeared overboard, carrying with it nearly twenty feet of steel bulwark.

Presently the canvas bridge-screen immediately in front of Kilsyth, unable to stand the strain of the wind, burst and flew into fragments. Pieces of the fabric whipped the lad's legs. He tried to shift his position but found that he was lashed to the stanchion. Some one—the Old Man most likely—had passed a lashing round his waist; in the fury of the storm he had not been aware of it.

Blinded by the hissing rain, deafened by the terrific combination of Nature's noises, shaken in every limb by the fury of the wind and the erratic movement of the sorely-pressed vessel, Kenneth lost consciousness.

CHAPTER III

TERROR !

WHEN he came to himself the sun was shining brightly in an unclouded sky. The wind had dropped, but the *Mumtaz* was wallowing horribly in the trough of the still violent seas.

The lad was lying on the bridge with the lashing still holding him to the stanchion, although luckily for him there was sufficient slack to allow his inert body to rest upon the steaming planks, that under the influence of the hot rays of the sun were rapidly drying.

For several moments, Ken lay quiet, keeping his eyes shielded from the glare. Gradually recollection came back. He remembered the ordeal of the gale—wondered what had become of his chum. The *Mumtaz* had survived the storm, but had the Old Man's belief come true that the wind had dispersed the sinister germs of that mysterious disease which had played havoc with the crew? Had Gerald fallen a victim either to the pestilence or to the fury of the wind and waves?

By a determined effort Ken raised himself and, sitting up, turned his eyes in the direction

where he had last seen his chum. The muscles of his neck were so swollen and stiff that the attempt caused him intense agony while his bloodshot eyes seemed like hot coals in his head.

Gradually his sense of vision grew stronger. Less than six feet from him he distinguished what at first appeared to be a sack or a rolled-up hammock. It was Hayes lying on his side with knees drawn up and arms flexed. He too had been prevented from sliding across the bridge in the heavy roll solely by the lashing round his waist.

"Gerald!" exclaimed Ken feebly.

There was no reply.

As the ship recovered from an excessive roll, young Hayes' head moved lifelessly in his chum's direction. Ken recoiled in horror, for the lad's eyes were wide open and there was blood welling from a gash somewhere on his face; where exactly Ken couldn't see, since the dark-red fluid had been smeared and looked far worse than it actually was.

Gamely Ken cast off the lashing and crawled to his chum's side. The effort was rendered still more difficult by reason of the disconcerting roll of the ship combined with his weakness of body.

Fearfully Ken placed his hand over his chum's heart. It was beating feebly.

Then he looked around for assistance. The bridge was deserted save for the two chums and

a motionless form lying at the head of the star-board ladder. There was plenty of noise. The halliards were thrumming against the masts, boats were groaning in the gripes with every roll of the ship. Gear that had broken adrift was careering madly across the deck. Yet, in spite of the tumult Ken missed one sound—the thud of the propeller-shaft. A thin, far-flung cloud of smoke was issuing from the funnel, but no steam was escaping from the steam-pipes. The engine had stopped. That was why the *Mumtaz* was rolling so heavily in the trough of the still mountainous waves.

Gripping the stanchion rail, Ken made his way to the port side of the bridge. Possibly some of the officers and crew were below. But at the head of the ladder he stopped and recoiled in horror. At the foot of it were two human beings—or something that had once been endowed with life. They were two of the men who had been ordered to the bridge before the storm broke. Now they lay with broken necks at the foot of the ladder. Whether they had been hurled off the bridge by the fury of the storm or had fallen victims to the dread disease, Ken knew not. Where, too, were the captain, the quartermaster and the rest of the depleted watch ?

His fears increasing at the sight, Ken returned to his chum. His first consideration was to get Gerald out of the sun and to wipe away the clotted blood. Watching his opportunity as

the ship temporarily righted herself, Ken cast off the lashing and passing his arms round Hayes' body dragged him towards the captain's cabin, which together with the chart-house and wireless room were on the bridge. In the former, he knew he could find water.

At the raised, brass-treaded threshold he stopped, gave one glance and recoiled. Stretched on the corticine-covered floor lay Captain Kent staring with sightless eyes at the ceiling. His jaw had dropped. Already his tanned features had assumed a greenish hue.

Carrying his chum to the wireless cabin, Ken placed him on the floor athwart-ships in order to counteract as far as possible the disconcerting roll. Then, after propping up Hayes' head with a rolled-up curtain, he went off in search of water. Nothing would induce him to go to the tap in the captain's cabin ; rather than do that he would step over the bodies of the seamen lying at the foot of the ladder.

Weak and shaking in every limb, Ken cautiously made his way down the slippery ladder, stopping and holding on like grim death as the ship reached the limit of each successive roll. At last he gained the deck and staggered aft to his cabin. Here he took the glass water-bottle and stowed it in the pocket of his coat, and with the primary object of his expedition achieved he retraced his steps to the bridge, meeting no one and finding no sign of life either on deck or below.

Carefully he wiped the blood from his chum's face. The nature of Gerald's injuries was revealed. There was a deep, but apparently clear gash on his left cheek and rather a nasty-looking wound on his forehead.

Ken had hardly completed this task when Hayes opened his eyes and looked vacantly at his chum.

"Better?" asked Ken.

"Where am I?" inquired Gerald thickly.

"That you, Ken?"

"Yes," replied the lad; then, unable to keep back the truth of the situation any longer he added, "And we're the only ones left on board."

The information failed to interest Hayes very much. Perhaps, in his present state, he failed to realize the condition of affairs.

Presently he opened his eyes again.

"What's happened?" he asked. "Have we got it?"

There was a grim significance about the word "it." Ken did not know how to frame a reply. In fact he was uncertain as to what had caused Gerald and himself to lose consciousness. He hoped fervidly that it was not the fell malady that had stricken down the officers and crew of the ill-fated ship. Judging by experience it seemed as if the result of such a disease was bound to be fatal.

He hedged.

"Try and go to sleep," he said.

"Might if I had something more to drink,"

replied his chum. "My throat's like blotting paper and my tongue feels like a cricket-ball."

"All right," rejoined Ken. "I'll fetch you some water."

The bottle he had brought from his cabin was empty. He dreaded the idea of going to the fresh-water tap in the old man's cabin. The alternative was either to make another trip aft or to draw water from the pump abaft the fo'c'sle.

He decided upon the pump for'ard. It was in the open. To get water aft he would have to go into the officers' cabins, and he did not know what gruesome sight might meet his eyes.

"I wish this confounded roll would stop," he muttered plaintively.

In the now windless sky the sun's rays, gaining strength as the orb of day approached the zenith, beat down fiercely upon the deck. Awnings had been rolled and stowed away before the storm broke. The while the *Mumtaz* continued her slow, sickening roll, broadside on to the long and fairly regular waves that followed in the wake of the departed typhoon.

Down the ladder he fought his way. He was still feeling weak and giddy. More than once his feet slipped on the treads, and it was only by hanging on like grim death to the metal hand-rail that he saved himself from a dangerous fall.

Then, stepping cautiously and taking advantage of every momentary pause in those sickening lurches, he staggered to the pump.

It was a fruitless errand. The pump had been smashed off close to the deck, leaving the bucket firmly jammed in the remains of the barrel.

"Must go aft, after all," muttered Kilsyth.

He paused as a wave swept across the deck and discharged itself in a cascade of foam through the jagged gap in the bulwarks. Then hurrying past the danger zone, he gained the comparative security of the undamaged rail.

Under the bridge he lurched and was about to pass the line of raised boiler-casing when he stopped dead in his tracks, petrified with fear. His eyes and mouth opened wide. Cold sweat oozed through the pores of his forehead, for coming towards him was something that could hardly be called human.

It was a short thick-set creature with bent legs and long dangling arms. It shuffled more like a gorilla than a human being. And the head——!

Was it the head of a devil or of some hideous caricature of a prehistoric animal? A scaly face, a pair of round, expressionless eyes, no mouth, but a nose resembling an elephant's trunk, only shorter and circular in section, afforded a terrifying sight to the startled lad. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to utter a sound or to move a limb; even when the hideous monster, after a brief pause, began to shuffle towards him.

CHAPTER IV

THE SOLE SURVIVORS

AT ten feet from the panic-stricken lad the monster paused as if to gloat over the sight of a helpless victim. Even in his agony Ken noticed that the creature made no effort to hold on to anything when the ship recovered from a heavy roll. It stood there, swaying with the erratic motion as if part of the deck. Then it gave vent to a hoarse, muffled roar.

At the sound Kilsyth's sense of action returned. With a cry of horror he turned and raced wildly for the bridge-ladder—madly, blindly and with only one object : to put as much space as possible between him and that hideous form on the well-deck.

Springing over the bodies of the two unfortunate men at the foot of the ladder—wondering as he did so if they had fallen victims to the monster and not to the dreaded epidemic—Ken scrambled up the steps and gained the bridge, trembling in every limb. Even then he realized that he and his chum were not safe. Where he could climb, surely that ape-like, shambling shape could follow ?

In his desperation the horror of the captain's

cabin faded into insignificance. He remembered that the Old Man kept an automatic in a case hanging on the bulk-head. Oft-times in those care-free days in the earlier part of the *Mumtaz's* voyage across the Pacific, Ken had noticed it. Boy-like he had even asked the Old Man if he kept it loaded and had received an affirmative reply.

Fear lent him wings. Stepping across the old man's lifeless body, Kilsyth removed the holster, dashed out and rushed to the wireless cabin.

There, to Hayes' uncomprehending astonishment, Ken slammed the door and bolted it. Then, with trembling fingers he drew the automatic from its case and released the safety catch. He took it for granted that Captain Kent had spoken the truth and that there was a cartridge in the breech and the rest in the magazine.

The touch of the loaded weapon restored Ken's confidence. He was no longer a defenceless being, but a man armed.

"What's up?" inquired Gerald from the floor.

"Don't know, yet," replied his chum, and in his weak state Hayes did not press the point.

Kilsyth, with the instinct possibly inherited from a soldier father, began to study his position as a place of defence. There was very little room in the wireless cabin. Much of the space was occupied by a bench on which stood the complicated array of wireless apparatus. Under the bench were batteries for the emergency set

for use when the dynamo was not running. Most of the remaining floor space was taken up by his chum's recumbent form. Against the bulkhead was a folded campstool.

In spite of the dazzling sunshine the wireless cabin was ill-lighted. There were two round scuttles in the steel walls. These Ken shut and secured by means of butterfly nuts. In the metal door was a rectangular louvre of teak. This, he realized, was a source of danger. It could either be battered in or removed by a moderate display of force from the outside. There was nothing in the cabin by which the jalousie could be barricaded.

Ken quickly realized that the cabin was vulnerable to attack from three directions : from either of the two scuttles, the glass of which could easily be shattered, or through the louvre in the door. But he was by no means sure of the nature of the attack. Would the thing deliver an onslaught with brute force, or would he squirt some poisonous death-dealing liquid or vapour through that hideous hose-like beak ? Or would he—or it—be content to wait until hunger and thirst delivered the victims into his clutches ?

Kilsyth began to heap reproaches on himself. Why hadn't he taken up his stand at the head of the bridge-ladder and pumped lead into the thing as it attempted to scale the steep incline ? Surely it would have been better to fight in the open and to fall back to the defence of the wireless room only as a last resource ?

He listened intently. Above the discordant noises of the heavily labouring ship and the splash of the waves against her sides, he could distinguish the characteristic groan of the ladder under the weight of a heavy body ascending it. It was too late now to defend the bridge.

Ken picked up the automatic. Something prompted him to fire a warning shot. He held the muzzle towards the ceiling and pressed the trigger. Pressed again and waited. Nothing happened.

Again the perspiration oozed through the lad's pores. Panic seized him. He had set his faith upon that sinister-looking weapon and it had failed him.

He heard the metal door of the old man's cabin slammed violently. The thing was only a few feet away.

Kilsyth's knowledge of automatic pistols was limited to what he had read of them. His idea was that it required merely the pressure of a finger on the trigger to make the weapon discharge a hail of nickle as long as the pressure were maintained and the magazine unexhausted. What he did not know was that the pistol had to be cocked by hand for the first shot, and that the recoil then recocked the weapon at the same time as the expended cartridge was ejected and the charged one thrust automatically into the breech.

A whiff of sulphurous smoke drifted in through the jalousie. The fumes caught Ken by the

throat. Vaguely he remembered a similar, poisonous smell as he stood panic-stricken at the sight of the hideous thing.

Hayes began to cough.

"What's wrong?" he demanded in a tone that showed that his previous lassitude had vanished.

Ken, still fumbling frantically with the pistol, did not reply. Unknowingly he contrived to cock the weapon. His finger was still on the trigger. There was a deafening explosion. The automatic dropped to the floor while through the faint haze of mingled cordite and sulphur fumes the lad could see a hole drilled neatly through the teak-work of the louvre.

"Ahoy, there! You blundering, cross-eyed son of a sea-cook!" exclaimed an angry voice, accompanied by a string of meaningless nautical oaths. "What are you monkeying about with, you slab-sided, wall-eyed lubber!"

Kilsyth gaped with astonishment. To hear the sound of a human voice when he expected to be greeted with a savage roar of a hideous brute was like a draught of cold water to a man dying from thirst. Even the coarse oaths sounded welcome by comparison.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"'Bout time you knowed," was the gruff response. "Out with ye!"

Unbolting and opening the door, Ken stepped across the raised coaming, blinking in the dazzling rays of the sun. Gradually his smarting eyes

made out the features of Bridges, the quartermaster.

"Wot! two of yer?" queried the man, peering into the wireless cabin. "Alive an' kickin', too! Strike me if I didn't think you were both stiff 'uns a while back."

Ken could have reciprocated the thought, but for the present he considered it advisable to "go slow." Even the sight of the quartermaster's discarded and hideous headgear did not soothe his doubts.

Bridges shot a swift glance first at the headgear and then at Kilsyth's bewildered face.

"Blest if I knows why you got the jumps," he remarked. "I beckoned yer, but you wouldn't stop. Ain't yer never seen a perishin' smoke-'elmit afore?"

Ken shook his head.

"Well, yer knows now, eh?" continued Bridges. "I wur down below doin' a bit o' fumigatin'. Nothing like sulphur, as I tried to tell the Old Man. Seems to me you two an' me's the only ones left. Nice lash up down in engine-room, I'll allow. . . . Goodness only knows 'ow we'll get 'em up outer it. Say, what's this?"

He stepped forward, stooped and picked up the automatic.

"Careless o' you, very," he declared more in sorrow than in anger. "You might 'ave 'urted yourself."

With that he gently released the striker of the weapon and, having set the safety-catch,

placed the automatic in his hip-pocket. Then lurching to the lee side of the bridge he hurled the still smoking pan of sulphur into the sea.

"Not in the pink, is 'e?" queried Bridges, indicating the prostrate Hayes.

"No, neither am I," admitted Ken.

"Might a' bin worse," rejoined the quartermaster dispassionately. "This 'ere hooker ain't done for—not by a long chalk. We may fetch 'er in yet."

"How far are we from land?" asked Ken.

"Matter o' three or four mile, I'll allow," replied the quartermaster. "Got me? That ain't our course, though. It's *dry* land we wants, not Davy Jones' perishin' locker. Come for'ard along o' me an' see if we can clap canvas on 'er. As she is she ain't no more good than a dead marine."

"You'll be all right till I come back?" asked Kilsyth of his chum.

"Right-o," replied Gerald. "Fetch some water when you do."

Ken followed the quartermaster down the ladder. Bridges, disdaining any support, had joined the fo'c'sle before the lad had gone half-way along the slippery, heaving deck. He was still feeling faint and shaking in his limbs; but although he did not realize that he was hungry, much of his weakness was due to lack of food. Also he was very thirsty.

Nevertheless he guessed the reason for the quartermaster's activity. By setting a staysail

and causing the ship's head to pay off, she would no longer lie helplessly in the trough of the sea and much of the distressing rolling would be obviated.

Fortunately the staysail closely stowed and encased in a stout canvas covering had suffered no damage from the gale. It was a long and tedious task to secure the stiff metal hanks to the forestay and to hoist the stubborn sail. Harder still, to sheet it home; but at length the flapping canvas bellied out to the now light breeze and slowly the *Mumtaz* began to gather way.

"That'll do for now," commented Bridges breathlessly. "She's doin' a knot now, maybe; but that ain't neither 'ere nor there. She ain't rollin' 'arf so much, is she?"

Ken agreed.

"Later on we'll rig fore an' aft canvas," continued the quartermaster. "A squaresail 'ud be best, but I don't think there'll be one aboard. Then we'll fix up the 'and-steerin' gear an'—— Bless me, you look fair 'ungry. Nip aft an' 'elp yourself. There's enough for us all in the officers' pantry, I'll allow."

Then, seeing the lad hesitate, he added:

"There's no call to be scared, I've seen to that."

Kilsyth went aft. It was now an easy matter to walk, for the ship no longer rolled to any extent nor did the water surge over the well-deck.

The quartermaster had spoken truly when he reassured Ken concerning the cabins under the poop deck. They were now untenanted both by the living and the dead.

Foraging, the lad took possession of a couple of bottles of soda-water and a bottle of light red wine. He had made up his mind to abstain as far as practicable from the water in the tanks; thinking that the none too fresh liquid might have been responsible to a great extent for the epidemic that had more than decimated the crew of the ill-fated *Mumtaz*. He also took a box of dry biscuits and tin of pressed beef. With these he returned to the bridge, noticing as he did so that the bodies of the men which had been lying at the foot of the ladder were no longer there.

Each lad drank his share of soda-water with avidity and began to tackle the food without much zest. Presently they found that their appetites were far from poor—in fact, without realizing it at first, they were both desperately hungry. Then they tackled the wine and finally Ken went aft for more soda-water and lime-juice.

“I feel quite all right now,” declared Gerald.

“Good!” exclaimed his chum. “But don’t move; take it easy.”

“Take it easy!” echoed Hayes. “I like that! Think I’m going to stick here and let you do all the work. What’s Bridges up to?”

“Clearing up, I fancy,” replied Ken.

Gerald understood. For some moments he remained silent, then:

"Is that right about there being only three of us left?" he asked.

Ken nodded.

Presently the quartermaster came up the bridge-ladder puffing like a grampus. He had been inclined to look upon Kilsyth as a mere useless land-lubber; but, judging by the way in which the lad had assisted in setting the stay-sail, his views had undergone a change.

"We'll have that lot down," he remarked, pointing aloft to where the tattered remnants of the NC signal ("In distress: need immediate assistance") still fluttered in the breeze. "Look out letter L from the signal locker."

Ken did so.

"What does it mean?" he asked, eyeing without enthusiasm the black and yellow squares.

"Got plague on board," replied Bridges bluntly. "'Tain't fair if we sights a vessel to get 'er to send a boat. It might mean doin' the lot of 'em in. If they likes to tow us into port an' earn a tidy drop o' salvage—well, that's a different proposition."

"He's a rough sort," thought Ken. "But he's a sportsman for all that."

The signal flag was duly hoisted. Bridges paced to and fro for a few minutes. Then he paused abruptly and beckoned to Ken.

"I'm a-goin' to ditch the Old Man," he announced. "I'll sew him up proper-like with a few fire-bars to sink him decently. I'll say this for the Old Man, even though he's ticked

me off afore now, he was a game 'un to the last. Right through that blow 'e stuck it, though I could see 'e was tur'ble bad. Then, just as the wind eased up, 'e turned to me, 'Take 'er, quartermaster,' 'e said. There was only 'im an' me left, you'll understand, an' e'd been reliev-in' me at the wheel for the last two hours. Then 'e noticed we were easin' down, so 'e yanks the engine room telegraph. There was no reply, so he whistles down the voice-tube. Still no answer. The old hooker was still slowin' down—'adn't no way to speak of. 'My Gawd, quartermaster!' sez 'e—an' I'll never forget the look on 'is face—'they're all done in down there!' With that 'e stumbled into 'is cabin an' that wur the last I seed of 'im alive. 'E'd nursed the old hooker through the thick of it, and when 'e couldn't do no more—'e'd been dyin', all the time, so to speak—he just went out quietly like."

In less than ten minutes Bridges had completed his mournful task. Captain Kent's body, sewn up in a piece of canvas and weighted head and feet with some fire-bars, was committed to the deep. Then, having burnt more sulphur in the skipper's cabin, the quartermaster went off to get a meal.

The while the *Mumtaz* was making way and keeping fairly steady in her course. The hand-steering-wheel had been lashed, so that there was no necessity for a helmsman. The ship could only sail almost before the wind to an unknown

destination. For the present it was immaterial as to where she was making for ; it was sufficient to be able to keep her steady and clear of the trough of the steadily subsiding waves.

To Kilsyth's unbounded joy, his chum was rapidly recovering. If, as might be the case, both lads had had a mild attack of the mysterious disease, they were cheered in the knowledge that they were the only two on board who having been attacked had survived. It gave them hope. Perhaps they were now immune from further danger in that direction.

About a quarter of an hour before sunset Bridges appeared.

"Either of you know 'ow to use this?" he asked, holding up a sextant, recently the property of the late chief officer. "You don't? Well, I thought as much. We're in the soup as to our position."

"Where are we, do you think?" asked Gerald.

The quartermaster went into the chart-room and returned with a "blue-back." This he spread on the deck, keeping it from coiling up by means of his knife and the automatic pistol.

"'Ere you are," he said, pointing to a pencil line, terminating in a cross. "That's where we were yesterday noon—afore the blow got us. Where we are now, Old Nick only knows, an' 'e wouldn't tell under a pint. We're somewheres 'ere."

And with a podgy thumb the quartermaster covered a section of the chart of the Pacific

representing an area of possibly two thousand square miles.

"Strikes me," he continued, "we'll hit the Marshall Islands if we carry on long enough. If we miss 'em ten to one we'll pile her up Chinaside unless a Chink pirate don't mope us up afore."

"Pirate?" echoed Gerald. "I didn't know there were pirates nowadays."

Bridges snorted.

"So much for what you knows," he rejoined. "There are dozens of 'em. If they fell in with us and found only us three aboard they'd cut our throats as perlite as you like an' loot the ship afore they scuttled 'er."

He stood up and folded the chart.

"Which reminds me," he added, "I don't want ter go about wi' a perishin' pistol—just yet. I'll put it in the chart-house along wi' this. Don't go monkeyin' about with it, though."

In a few seconds the quartermaster was back again, moving more briskly than before.

"No excuse for no lights even though we're short-'anded," he remarked. "Get up the port an' starboard lamps. We don't want no mast-head lamp seein' as we ain't steamin'."

Ken went to the lamp-room and brought out the oil lamps. The usual steaming lights were electrically lit, but with the engines stopped and the dynamos not running they were useless; although as a matter of fact there were batteries charged, but the lad was unaware of the fact.

His task done, Kilsyth returned and reported "Lights burning!" as he had heard the men report to the officer on duty in those seemingly far-off days.

"All right," rejoined the quartermaster. "Now you two can turn in. No need to keep watch as far as I know of. If I wants you I'll give you a hail."

The chums did not fancy the idea of going to their cabin to sleep. They brought their bedding on the bridge, rigged up an awning abaft the wireless cabin and spread their mattresses on the planks. The night was warm. The wind had fallen away completely. Thoroughly tired out they were both soon fast asleep.

Ken was the first to awake. He might have slept longer had it not been for the sun shining on his face. He sat up suddenly, surprised to find that it was broad daylight. Gerald was breathing gently in a refreshing slumber. His chum let him sleep.

"I'll get breakfast," he decided. "I wonder Bridges hadn't turned us out long ago."

The *Mumtaz* was now almost motionless. Not only was it a flat calm, but the sea was as smooth as a millpond. The disconcerting sounds so noticeable as the ship rolled were entirely absent. Everything was calm and peaceful.

Making his way to the galley, Ken lighted the stove and put on a kettle of water; cut slices of salt pork and placed them in a frying-pan. There was plenty of bread on board—the cook had

baked a batch only three days ago, but somehow the lad could not bring himself to handle it. There were biscuits on the bridge—nearly a barrel of them. As an afterthought he prepared some porridge.

As soon as he had made tea, Ken went to the fo'c'sle.

"Ready for breakfast, Mr. Bridges?" he inquired.

There was no reply. Evidently the quartermaster was sound asleep.

Somewhat gingerly the lad peeped into the space normally occupied by the crew—a triangular compartment with a double tier of bunks on two sides. Signs of the previous occupant were everywhere in evidence yet the place was untenanted.

"I suppose Bridges thinks he's entitled to a berth aft now," thought Ken, as he made his way to the cabins under the poop.

He called again. Still there was no reply. A haunting suspicion flashed across his mind—a suspicion that increased as he looked into the cabins one by one.

"There are heaps of places on the ship where he might be," mused Ken as he re-shut the door of the last cabin.

He searched, but without success. The engine- and boiler-room he let wisely alone, for, with a very good reason, the hatchways had been shut and firmly secured.

"Perhaps he's in the captain's cabin, after

all," thought the lad, and returning to the galley he loaded up a tray and carried it to the bridge.

"Hello, you're awake, lazy hog," was Ken's cheery greeting, when he noticed his chum opening his eyes. "Here's brekker. Seen anything of Bridges?"

"No," replied Gerald. "Why? Isn't he about?"

Without another word, Kilsyth went to the skipper's cabin. A glance showed that the missing quartermaster was not there. The bunk was undisturbed. Then he searched the chart-house, with the same result. As a last resource he rang the ship's bell. The high tones could be heard all over the ship, but the last notes echoed into complete silence and still no quartermaster responded to the peremptory summons.

There was also an ominous significance in the fact that the sidelights were still burning. A stickler for routine such as the quartermaster would hardly have left them burning after sunrise.

"Perhaps he's made himself dead drunk, and is sound asleep," suggested Gerald.

"I'll soon see if he has," rejoined his chum. "Mind you, I don't think for one moment you're right. If he wanted to get tight he'd have done so before this."

Ken knew that the quartermaster would not want to drink light wine. A quantity of that was kept in the officers' pantry, and Bridges had refused to taste it on the previous day. The

spirit room was aft, but the door was kept locked, the key hanging in the captain's cabin.

The key was still there. To make doubly certain that Hayes was in the wrong, Ken went aft. The door of the spirit room was securely locked.

The haunting dread developed into a certainty. The quartermaster had vanished—probably had gone over the side either by accident or, finding himself in the last throes of the disease, had deliberately ended his misery.

Ken and Gerald remained the sole survivors of the S.S. *Mumtaz*.

CHAPTER V

DANGER AHEAD !

“**W**ISH you were back at G. and G.’s, old son ? ” asked Hayes.

Ken shook his head. There was no indecision in his voice when he replied :

“ Not for worlds, old thing ! Grabaul and Gett’s are a back number for this child. Wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

A week had elapsed since the disappearance of Bridges the quartermaster. To a pair of high-spirited youths seven days were sufficient to blot out much of the grim realities of that fearful time when the S.S. *Mumtaz* staggered on her course with her officers and crew literally dying like flies.

Warm, almost windless days and peaceful nights had done much to justify Kilsyth’s declaration. Both lads were now in excellent health. There was food in abundance. The ship, as seaworthy as ever, so far as her hull was concerned, required no handling. With the gentle breeze, constant in force and direction, just filling the loosely-sheeted staysail, the old hooker ambled on her way—whither the chums knew not, nor did they much care. They were confident that before very long they would sight another craft and be rescued.

Truth to tell, they did not look forward to such an event with a marked degree of enthusiasm. When adventure falls to the lot of a youth whose previous existence has been confined to an office stool he grasps it with both hands and revels in the sensation.

In the case of Kilsyth and his chum they realized that something was taking place—a voyage into the unknown. They shared the sensations that Columbus must have felt when day after day he gazed westward only to see an unbroken horizon.

No; they were not anxious to be taken off by a passing vessel. In their imagination they pictured themselves taking the slowly-moving ship into an unknown port and drawing for salvage a sum that would make Ken's thousand pounds seem paltry by comparison.

Already both lads were shaping well. A certain sense of responsibility had largely accounted for their enthusiasm. Once they imagined that they had no longer cause to fear the mysterious malady they accepted the situation with zest.

By this time they no longer feared to explore the cabins under the poop or that of the ill-fated skipper; but they made no effort to lift the hatches of the holds and, particularly, they left the closely secured hatches to the engine- and boiler-rooms severely alone.

"What'll happen if there's another storm?" asked Gerald.

"We'll have to hang on tight and hope for the best," replied his chum.

"We may have to take to one of the boats," suggested Hayes.

Ken glanced at the double-ended lifeboats swung in and resting on chocks.

"I'd rather stick to the ship," he declared. "'Sides, if it did come on to blow we couldn't swing one of those boats out."

Nevertheless, with a sense of precaution the chums provisioned and watered one of the whalers and placed a quantity of gear likely to be of use underneath the thwarts. Then, taking advantage of the calm weather, they managed by dint of great exertion to swing the boat out, securing her to the griping-spar so that, in the event of the ship rolling, the whaler would not be damaged by surging against the davits. Every day they threw water into her to keep the seams from opening in the intense heat of the sun, taking the precaution of removing the plug at night in order that a tropical deluge might not fill the boat and cause it to break away from the falls.

During their explorations they discovered a rifle and a couple of shot-guns, together with a liberal supply of ammunition.

With the rifle they practised shooting at bottles tossed overboard until both lads developed into very fair shots. Ken also mastered the intricacies of Captain Kent's automatic. True an accidental discharge narrowly missed Gerald's head and shattered one of the windows of the chart-house; but the experience, disconcerting

at the time, taught Kilsyth a lesson, namely to keep the muzzle pointed away when actuating the intricate mechanism.

One afternoon they sighted the smoke of a steamer away to the south'ard. It would have been a simple matter to attract her attention by means of loud-detonating rockets. The vessel drew nearer and finally passed within three miles of the crippled *Mumtaz*. The chums did not fire the rockets. Instead Ken pointed to the signal-flying aloft. Gerald nodded and the next instant they began to haul down the yellow and black-squared flag.

"We can stick it for a long time yet," remarked Kilsyth.

Under the influence of the North-East Trades the old *Mumtaz* was being wafted through the water at between one and two knots. The lads realized this by the way in which objects thrown overboard drifted astern. What they did not know was that the ship was in the grip of the North Equatorial current. Wind and current were combining to make her do between 90 and a 110 miles a day, so that during the week following Bridges' disappearance, the drift had been considerable and the ship was well out of any of the recognized trade routes.

About midnight on the eighth day, Ken was awakened by something carrying away aloft and falling noisily upon the deck. Still drowsy he sat up and listened. The noise, whatever it was, was not repeated; but instead there was a

peculiar, far-off sound like the rumble of guns. The lad listened more intently.

"Thunder, perhaps," he muttered, and getting out of his bunk went to the open scuttle.

The night was moonless. There was the usual brilliance of stars in the tropical sky. Not a cloud was visible.

The noise was still in evidence. Now it resembled the rumbling of a train—but not quite. Once before Ken had heard a similar sound—that of the surf thundering on the beach at Hilo. The ship, too, was responding to the rebound of rollers thrashing a not far-distant reef. The breeze still held. If anything it was increasing in force, for the wire rigging was humming in the wind for the first time for days.

"Turn out, old man!" exclaimed Ken, shaking his companion by the shoulder. "We're near the land."

Both lads dressed hurriedly, put on their canvas shoes and went out.

As far as they could see the water was unobstructed—an expanse of rippling waves that glinted in the starlight. Yet, unmistakably, there were breakers ahead.

Casting off the lashings that secured it, Ken put the wheel hard over. The ship's head swung through a couple of points, yet the noise continued to come from dead ahead. The ship could point no higher and obviously the still invisible reef extended to such a length that it was out of the question to attempt to clear the tail of it.

"I wish it were day," remarked Gerald.
"Can't we lower the sail?"

Ken shook his head.

"No use," he replied. "We'd only drift broadside on. Our best chance if we've got to hit the reef is to hit it stem-on. 'Sides, we aren't there yet. It may be dawn before we strike."

Silence fell upon the two. They stood gripping the guard-rail and peering out into the night. Even by the aid of the late chief officer's night glasses no visible sign of the reef could be seen—nothing but the star-powdered wavelets rippling the long gentle swell.

Slowly yet surely the noise of the distant breakers increased until at a little after one o'clock, Ken picked up a ghostly white line ahead—a line that seemed to move rapidly across his range of vision and to disappear, only to be succeeded by another rippling streak of foam.

It was the surf keeping its ceaseless assault upon the dangerous coral reefs.

To make matters worse a mist was obscuring the stars. Soon visibility, even by the aid of the binoculars, was limited to a little less than a quarter of a mile. The sight of the danger was removed but the sound of it still remained—increasing in volume until it roared with no uncertain voice.

Inexperienced as they were, both lads realized instinctively that nothing short of a miracle would save them from being dashed to death upon the pitiless coral reef.

CHAPTER VI

THROUGH THE REEFS

“CAN’T we anchor?” asked Gerald.

His chum shook his head doubtfully.

“Might,” he replied; “I don’t know how it’s done; but we’ll have a shot at it.”

Descending the bridge and making their way for’ard the lads peered over the fo’c’sle guard-rail. A few feet beneath them could be seen the flukes of the stockless anchor. The shank was housed hard home in the hawse-pipe. Apparently nothing was holding it except the strain of the steel cable.

They fumbled about in the darkness, examining the compressor and the screw-stopper that alone prevented the anchor from being let go. They were baulked. Again a kindly fate was working in their behalf; for, had they succeeded in “letting go,” the water was so deep that the anchor would not have obtained a hold on the bed of the sea until the ship was actually pounding upon the reef.

“No go!” declared Kilsyth; “I vote we get back to the bridge, and put our lifebelts on. That seems our best chance. But we’ll stick to the ship as long as we can.”

They donned and secured the cork life-belts. Then they waited. They could do no more.

The *Mumtaz*, feeling the back-wash of the breakers, was wallowing horribly. It was a quicker, livelier motion than when she had been lying in the trough of the river. Fortunately the still-drawing staysail was keeping the ship before the wind.

The din was now terrific. In the dim starlight white water appeared ahead, on either beam and even on both quarters. The ship was actually within the outer limit of this patch of shoal ground, yet providentially she had not struck. Ahead a misty bank of wind-driven spray hid everything.

"Hang on tight!" roared Ken.

"Right-o!" shouted his chum.

A hissing wave broke completely over the waist. The *Mumtaz* staggered, rolled almost on her beam ends. The two lads, clutching the guard-rail, felt their feet slither helplessly.

Then came a terrific shock. The whole fabric of the bridge appeared to jump vertically. Again the ship lurched, this time to starboard. Held by her bows she swung round, the while grinding horribly.

Again and again she was lifted and flung upon the reef. Yet she was no longer stern on to the wind; she was nearly head on. Cascades of milk white foam poured over her fo'c'sle and surged across the well-deck.

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"She's going!" shouted Ken into his companion's ear. "But hang on!"

Even as he spoke, Kilsyth was aware that the crunching, grinding noise had ceased, although the roar of the breakers was as loud as before.

The *Mumtaz* had slid off the reef into deep water. Already the staysail was tending to drive her head round, but the movement was slow. And for a very good reason. The vessel was settling fast by the head. The sea, too, was no longer a tempestuous chaos. There was a decided swell, but the long waves were not high, nor were they crested.

Providentially the ship had been driven through a narrow gap in the reef and had struck temporarily on a ledge on the leeward side. She was now sheltered by a vast natural breakwater. Probably hundreds of miles of open sea lay beyond—and the *Mumtaz* was sinking fast.

"Make for one of the boats!" yelled Ken. "It's our only chance."

The chums raced down the ladder and ran aft. On the port side was the whaler they had provisioned and swung outboard, in the event of having to abandon the ship.

Knife in hand, Ken severed the lashings that held the boat to the gripping-spar.

"Cast off that rope!" he exclaimed, pointing to the after falls. "Ease her down gently!"

They lowered the boat to the level of the bulwarks. There it stuck. Owing to the now

decided list to starboard the whaler could not be lowered another foot.

"We'll have to get a boat down from the other side!" exclaimed Ken.

"There's no grub or water on her," said Gerald.

Kilsyth lost no time by bewailing his lack of foresight. Too late he remembered that by provisioning only one boat he had been putting all his eggs into one basket.

"Chuck as much of the stuff as you can into the other boat!" he shouted, and set the example by heaving cases and bags out of the hung-up whaler and transporting them across the deck to the other boat.

As he did so the *Mumtaz* gave a terrific lurch to starboard. Midway across the deck, Ken lost his foothold, and slid into the water foaming in the lee scuppers. Gerald, being close to the davit, threw his arms round it while his feet slithered on the slippery, steeply inclined deck. For a few long-drawn-out moments both lads imagined that the ship was turning turtle and was already plunging beneath the surface; until, with a hardly perceptible bump, the starboard bilge keel struck bottom.

With tons of water pouring in through her badly holed keel-plates, the *Mumtaz* partly recovered from her list and settled until she lay with her decks at an angle of about twenty degrees firmly upon the sea floor. Ken picked himself up, coughing and spluttering. Stopping to wring the water from the legs of his trousers he made his

way to his chum who was still holding on to the davit.

"Gerald, old son! We're shipwrecked!" he exclaimed gleefully, for now that the ordeal was over his spirits had risen like mercury.

"Looks like it," admitted Hayes, "but it's nothing to make a song about."

"Isn't it?" rejoined his irrepressible chum. "I feel like singing 'It ain't gonna rain no mower!'"

"You're wet enough as it is," commented Hayes. "A little rain wouldn't hurt you. Now, what's the programme? Carry on getting the boat lowered?"

"No fear," decided Ken. "Here we are with the ship as firm as a rock. Best thing we can do is to get back to the bridge and wait till daylight."

Making their way along on the port side the two lads found themselves again upon the bridge—but what a difference. There was no longer any "life" in the ship. It was merely a water-logged mass of metal and wood, resting firmly upon the bottom of the sea. Instead of being able to walk the bridge in comfort, the chums were confronted by the steeply shelving planks and inclined walls of the chart-house and wireless room. No longer did the bridge convey the impression of height. Even in the misty starlight it seemed only a few feet above the surface. Actually the starboard end was barely a man's height clear of the water.

"I vote we get some grub," suggested Gerald.

He stepped cautiously towards the wireless cabin, where they had been in the habit of storing a few provisions.

As he did so, something whizzed past his ear and stuck quivering in the teak door. The nearness of the object as it swung past his head made Hayes duck involuntarily.

"What's that?" demanded Ken.

"Something carried away aloft," replied his chum, then he caught sight of a slender shaft with one end deep in the woodwork.

"An arrow!" he exclaimed

"Right, old thing," agreed Ken. "Keep your head out of sight. Strikes me we've hit a rough house, my festive."

CHAPTER VII

ARROWS IN THE NIGHT

IT was the first time in his life that Ken Kilsyth found himself "up against" this sort of thing. Naturally to find himself a target for the arrow of a skulking native, to whom he had given no cause for offence, got his back up.

Bending, he slid down the sloping planks till he came to the captain's cabin. Seizing a 12-bore shot-gun and thrusting home a cartridge, he braced his feet against the raised coaming of the doorway and raised the weapon to his shoulder.

He knew that it would be a chance shot. No sign of the treacherous Bowman was to be seen. All Ken could do was to judge the direction by that of the arrow.

Before Kilsyth could press the trigger another shaft whizzed through the darkness, glancing from the steel wall of the cabin.

Ken fired. A vivid flash lit up everything for yards around. The kick of the gun nearly capsized the lad. The crash of the report had well-nigh deafened him; while the darkness following the flash was profound.

"You've hit some one, Ken," declared Gerald, who had taken cover behind the cabin well. "I

heard him squeal. Pass me out another gun."

Kilsyth handed out the second 12-bore and a few cartridges.

"See anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing," replied Hayes, "but can't you hear oars or something?"

"Paddles, I guess; no, that racket has made me deaf—or nearly so. We'll give the fellow a couple of shot for luck. Mind how she kicks."

Gerald did not. In his excitement he let rip with both barrels simultaneously, and as the butt was not held firmly in the hollow of his shoulder the recoil made him sit down with disconcerting suddenness and painfulness.

"That's scared him," declared Ken.

"It's scared me," rejoined his chum, rubbing his shoulder. "That chap must have eyes like a cat to spot us in the darkness."

"Quite likely," agreed Kilsyth. "But you see we were showing up against the starlight. P'raps there's a crowd of them. I vote we sit tight till dawn."

Accordingly they barricaded themselves in the wireless room, remaining keenly on the alert to catch the first suspicious noise that might indicate the presence of a declared and as yet unseen foe.

At length the tardy dawn broke. Within a few minutes intense darkness had been replaced by daylight.

Cautiously the wearied watchers peered through the scuttles. To their surprise they found that

they were within a quarter of a mile of land. True it was only a small island, probably about four or five miles in circumference with a height not exceeding fifty feet. Yet, after seeing nothing but an expanse of sea and sky for days past, it was a welcome sight.

The island had the appearance of being uninhabited. For the most part it was thickly covered with undergrowth. Here and there were open patches of withered grass. On the northern slope of the highest ground were a few coco-palms. The beach was composed of dazzling white sand ; but there were no signs of a boat or canoe being hauled up, nor was there any to be seen afloat upon the fairly expansive stretch of water commanded by the view from the scuttles.

"Think it safe to go out ?" asked Gerald, "or do you think that a native with a bow and arrows is sitting on the poop ready to take pot shots at us at close range ?"

"I'm not going to stay cooped up in this dog-box if that's what you mean," rejoined Ken. "Come on. Take a gun with you."

Silently they unbolted the jalousied door and peered out. They were now facing aft. The poop deck was about six or seven feet above the water on the starboard quarter, more on the port side. The waist was awash, with only a few planks showing. The list had been reduced during the night, owing no doubt to the waterlogged hull settling in soft sand.

Now in the light of day the chums were able to form some idea of the nature of their miraculous escape. A mile away at its nearest point was the reef, or rather complications of reefs. The outer edges of these were still swept with heavy rollers that broke and roared in a continuous thunder, as the spray was hurled high in the air. There was only one visible break in the formidable line of practically submerged coral—an intricate channel looking hardly as wide as the beam of the S.S. *Mumtaz*. Yet she had managed to scrape through. True she had foundered through the injuries she had received, but she had found her way into the lagoon. A few yards either to the right or left and she would have stuck hard on the treacherous reefs, and by now would have been a far-flung mass of disintegrated metal.

Signs were not lacking of the lads' unseen assailant of the previous night. Four arrows were sticking obliquely in the shelving planks of the bridge—all within a radius of a yard. They were formidable-looking missiles made of hard, greenish wood terminating in a triple-barbed head at one end and gaudily coloured feathers at the other. So swift had been their flight that the heads were buried more than an inch in the tough teak decking.

But of the mysterious individual who had shot them there was no sign. With shot-guns held at the ready and fingers ready to press the triggers, the chums crept from one cover to another, until gaining the elevated side of the bridge,

they were able to command an almost uninterrupted view of the partly submerged well-deck. Neither boat nor canoe lay alongside, nor was there any craft to be seen either on the lagoon or on shore.

"Stop here, old son," said Ken. "I'm going to have a look round and see if there's anyone behind the boiler casing. There and under the poop are the only places above water where a fellow can hide."

"Right-o," agreed Hayes. "And if I spot anyone, I'll let rip."

"No you don't," protested his chum hurriedly. "Not with a 12-bore. The shots spread and I don't want to be peppered. I'll take care of myself."

So saying Ken began to descend the now awkward bridge-ladder. He was revelling in the novelty of the situation. Romance had been as dead as a door-nail in the musty offices of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett. Now he was "up against it." And not only romance and adventure, but he was risking his life. If any one had told him two months ago——!

He smiled to himself as he contrasted the two situations. Two months ago he was arrayed in a conventional dark suit and linen collar and keeping his nose to the grindstone under the eagle eye of the saturnine Mr. Gurgle. Now, rigged out in grimy flannel shirt and duck trousers, and practically master of the situation, he was prowling round with a loaded double-

barrelled gun looking for a murderous native on the deck of a partly submerged ship.

He had purposely taken the 12-bore in preference to the automatic pistol. The latter, although a powerful weapon, might or might not stop the rush of a savage. Besides, he might miss his aim. On the other hand, a charge of small shots at close quarters would drop a man in his tracks.

Keeping close to the port side Ken worked his way aft. For'ard the deck was under water. Even the fo'c'sle was submerged, for the ship had settled in deeper water for'ard than aft. No skulking foe could find a hiding-place there.

A cautious yet thorough search revealed no signs of an enemy. The doors of the saloon under the poop-deck were shut even as Ken had left them. He took the precaution of locking them and placing the key in his pocket.

"He's not on board," reported Kilsyth as he rejoined his chum.

"What's to be done now?" asked Gerald.

"Grub," was the practical response.

The meal over, they set about to remove all the provisions they could find from the after pantry and carry them to the bridge. That would render them practically independent. There would be no need to quit their relatively dry perch in the event of a hostile crowd of natives putting in an appearance.

The tide had fallen a couple of feet, thus making the saloon more accessible, and they took

advantage of this to remove various articles likely to be of use from the officers' cabins.

The sun's rays grew hotter and hotter. The surface of the lagoon was now as smooth as a mill-pond, while the reflected glare was almost as fierce as the direct sunlight.

"Wish we could get ashore," remarked Hayes wistfully, regarding the shade afforded by the foliage.

"Why not?" asked his chum.

"And be punctured by a nasty-looking arrow—no, thank you," rejoined Gerald.

"Well, I'm going to risk that," declared Kilsyth.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ISLAND OF HORROR

“**R**IGHT-O! I’m on it, too,” exclaimed Hayes.

“Not so fast, my festive,” protested his chum. “I’m certainly going ashore—after I am satisfied that the place is clear. To do that I mean to take one of the boats round the island. Are you game?”

Hastily one of the whalers on the starboard side was swung out, provisioned and watered and lowered. Although clear of the surface as she hung in davits she was swung easily, and had to be lowered only a few feet before she was waterborne.

The whaler was a lump of a craft, being twenty feet in length, generously broad of beam and provided with copper air tanks to render her practically unsinkable. The mast and sail, the latter in a painted waterproof cover, lay on the thwarts; but as it was a flat calm, they looked more like being an encumbrance than a help.

Taking their arms and ammunition the lads jumped into the boat, cast off and manned the oars. Once the whaler gathered way they were surprised at the ease with which she glided

through the water under only a couple of thirteen-foot oars.

"What's the range of an arrow?" asked Ken.

"Two hundred yards, I should imagine," replied Gerald.

"I think we're safe from anything but a dropping shaft," commented Kilsyth. "We'll take our time and keep a smart look-out ashore."

The tide was now at its lowest, the range being only a matter of about four feet. Consequently the reefs showed at their highest, and a truly formidable barrier they looked when viewed from the lee'ard side. Although the outer fringes were smothered in foam, the reefs effectively prevented the breakers making any undulations in the lagoon. The surface was like glass.

At intervals the lads rested on their oars and examined the island by means of the Old Man's binoculars. Through the powerful lenses the shore appeared to be only a few yards away. Any signs of human agency in the clean, sandy strand would be noticeable at once; but neither by footprints nor the tracks of a canoe that had been hauled up the beach were there any indications of a suspicious nature.

Rounding at a generous distance the northeastern extremity of the island, the chums opened out a second but obviously tortuous channel through the reefs. Beyond, at no less than five miles away, was a much larger island with three lofty peaks partly enshrouded by mists; while by

the aid of the glasses they could make out more peaks showing above the horizon.

"That's where the native or natives came from, I'm pretty certain," remarked Ken. "That's something like an island—not a sixpenny-half-penny affair like this. They nipped in through that gap and probably cleared out the same way."

"Let's hope so," rejoined Hayes. "But what did they want to come here for? I don't suppose they paddled all that distance for the sake of taking pot-shots at us?"

"'Course not," agreed Kilsyth. "For one thing it was dark when we scraped in between the reefs. Well, the odds are that our island is uninhabited; but we'll carry on and complete the circular trip."

It took two hours to circumnavigate the island, including frequent spells to enable the chums to sweep the shore with the binoculars. Nowhere did they find traces of human habitation, and except for two gaps in the reef, there were no other channels whereby even the smaller craft could gain the open sea from the lagoon.

Judging by the position of the sun, it was now noon. According to their watches the lads were informed that it was two o'clock. This puzzled them considerably. Their watches had been keeping excellent time. Now they seemed to have jumped two hours. The ship's chronometer had run down, and they had not been able to find the key.

"We can't have covered thirty degrees since

Bridges went," remarked Gerald. "Yes, it's not much past noon."

"I don't see that it matters much," declared the optimistic Kilsyth. "We haven't to be at the office by a certain time, so why hurry? Let's get another meal and then we'll explore our island."

"You're getting a regular slave-driver," declared Hayes, ruefully examining his blistered palms. "This wasn't in the contract, you know, when you took me away from Grabaul and Gett's."

Ken glanced sharply at his chum; but one look was enough to satisfy him that Gerald was trying to take a rise out of him.

"All the same," continued Hayes, "I'm not grumbling: I'm merely stating facts. But I wouldn't miss this stunt for worlds. When do we start for the island, partner? Can't we take grub and have a picnic ashore?"

This suggestion was acted upon. More provisions were placed in the whaler together with a quantity of spare bedding, canvas, cordage, and other gear likely to be useful in the event of the chums being obliged to abandon the ship.

"How about fresh water?" asked Hayes, "or do we obtain it ashore?"

"We'll take some," decided Ken, "although it can hardly be called fresh. In fact, it's jolly brackish. I've almost forgotten what fresh water tastes like; but I doubt whether we'll be lucky enough to find any on that island."

"Don't talk slightingly of our island," pro-

tested Gerald. "It's served us well already and we were lucky that the old *Mumtaz* brought up here instead of on the reef."

The chums boarded the whaler and propelled her with easy strokes towards the beach. They landed on a shelving stretch of glistening sand, and, having secured the boat's painter to a tree stump, plunged boldly between the dense undergrowth.

Ken carried the rifle. His chum shouldered the double-barrelled shot-gun and held an axe in his right hand. The automatic, with the safety-catch set, reposed in Kilsyth's hip-pocket.

It felt strange to be ashore again. After such a prolonged spell afloat the ground seemed unyielding, but at the same time it had the impression of moving up and down like the motion of a ship.

On and on they went seeing nothing of animal life of any description. The absence of birds gave the island a peculiar sense of solitude. Ken remarked that it was like being in an empty house.

Scarlet hibiscus flowered profusely; plants bearing luscious-looking berries and young trees laden with strange fruits were everywhere. Yet, in their justifiable ignorance of the flora of this part of the globe, the chums had to be content with looking—they had sufficient sense of restraint to run the risk of being poisoned.

It was different with the coco-nuts. They had seen them growing in Hawaii, otherwise they

would never have recognized the green, husk-covered nuts as the same that serve as target for fair-goers in far-off Britain.

"Not much satisfaction seeing the things grow if we can't get them," remarked Hayes, craning his neck to gaze upwards at the feathery tuft at the top of a slender palm. "I couldn't swarm up and I don't suppose you can."

"I'm not going to try," replied Ken with a laugh. "What's the use of your lugging an axe about if you don't use it?"

"That's all very well," agreed his chum, "but there aren't many palms on the island. If we have to hack a tree down every time we want coco-nuts there won't be any left in a month or so."

"Quite," concurred Ken. "So you take it for granted we're rooted here, eh? Personally, I don't mind as long as we've enough to eat and drink. The *Mumtaz's* water tank won't last much longer."

"There must be fresh water on the island," declared Gerald hopefully. "Else how does all the green stuff grow? This isn't England where we've been having a storm every week and once on each Bank Holiday, just to show there's no ill feeling!"

Deciding to defer the palm-felling operation until the return journey the chums pushed on, making for the highest part of the island. In places the scrub was so thick that they had to make considerable detours and even to use the

axe to clear a path ; but after an hour's slow progress they found themselves at the foot of the slight eminence they had noticed from the ship.

"Race you to the top," suggested Hayes.

"Right-o !" agreed Ken.

Hampered by their respective weapons, their muscles flabby through lack of exercise, and oppressed by the tropical glare of the sun, the chums did not make much of a show. Ken won by a few yards, and when he reached the summit, he stopped dead in horror and amazement.

The summit of the hill consisted of an oval-shaped expanse measuring roughly fifty paces by twenty enclosing a shallow crater-like depression. In the centre of this hollow was an oven-like structure built of coral cement. All around were ashes and human bones.

"Who said the island isn't inhabited ?" exclaimed Ken. "Look !"

Overcoming his initial repugnance, Kilsyth strode to the outer edge of the circle of calcined wood. The bones had only recently been exposed to fire, while at one side of the altar or stove was a lump of charred flesh.

"Cannibals !" declared Ken tersely.

"Sure ?" asked Gerald. "It might be——"

He paused abruptly as his glance fell upon a silent corroboration of his chum's statement. Half buried in the grey ashes was a human skull with a circular hole in the frontal bone.

"You're right," agreed Hayes. "At least, right up to a certain point. The cannibals have

probably cleared off to one of those islands we can see over there. No doubt they were on their way back, when they let rip with their arrows at us."

"With a charge of dust-shot to take back as a souvenir," added Ken grimly. "Hello, what are these?"

He pointed to a number of small holes sunk in the short turf. There were dozens of them at irregular intervals, each about two inches in diameter and about that length in the ground. There were faint indications of a similar nature around the dead fire, but owing to the hardness of the ground, they were hardly noticeable. Others of a more pronounced character formed an irregular trail leading to the side of the hill opposite that by which the chums had ascended. Of actual footprints there was none.

"Curious," remarked Ken. "These marks look as if they were caused by a crowd of wooden-legged chaps. Of course the natives would be bare-footed and leave hardly a sign of a footprint. It's just likely that these marks were made by the butt-ends of their spears."

"Shaft two inches thick?" queried Hayes.

"P'raps," rejoined Kilsyth. "Let's see where this track leads to."

They gained the rim of the crater. There they brought up abruptly, hardly able to credit their sense of sight; for at less than two hundred yards away was a circle of armed savages converging upon the hill on which the lads stood.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIGHT FOR THE HILL

THERE were perhaps a couple of hundred of these fiendish savages, tall, muscular men, each almost stark naked save for a loin cloth and a necklet of shark's teeth. Their bodies were painted in crude designs with red and yellow ochre and white paint. Their hair was frizzed out with grease and bent pieces of bamboo till it resembled a turban. Their weapons consisted of rectangular shaped shields, multi-barbed spears, and grotesquely carved clubs. Each man also carried a couple of poles about seven feet in length. A few of the natives were armed with bows and arrows.

In utter silence they had taken up their formation surrounding the hill, and in utter silence they were advancing and converging with the obvious intention of surprising the two unsuspecting whites.

Even when the chums appeared upon the rim of the crater in full view of the armed ring, the savages made no sound. Unlike most primitive races, who almost invariably trust to hideous yells to terrify their foes, these natives possessed a sufficient amount of discipline to move silently,

and the ominous stillness rendered them no less terrifying.

Two against two hundred ! It was certainly great odds ; yet face to face with peril both lads realized that fight was the only thing to be done. Either they must fight and win, or fight and be slain ; and slain, they would then serve as a delicacy at a cannibal feast. True they would know nothing of *that*, but the thought was none the less horrible.

Half a dozen determined men armed with modern rifles could have held the crater-like summit of the hill easily. Two were insufficient. The expanse, limited though it was, was too wide for two defenders to cope with a simultaneous assault on all sides.

Mildly amazed at his own coolness, Ken opened the cut-out of his magazine rifle. It was of a sporting type, light to handle and taking five cartridges in the magazine.

Gerald's hands shook slightly as he drew a fistful of No. 5 cartridges from his pocket and placed them on the ground in readiness when the time came to reload his gun.

"Don't fire yet !" cautioned Ken, realizing that the range of the shot-gun would be ineffective. "Wait till they reach the foot of the hill."

With almost machine-like precision the ring of savages contracted until the natives were almost shoulder to shoulder. Still no sound came from that ordered circle. They were as yet ten or

twelve paces from the base of the hill when a horn sounded.

Instantly every man stood stock-still as if made of wood—a menacing statue of ebony.

Again the horn rang out. Immediately the savages placed the poles with which each was equipped in front of him and leapt. The next instant the warriors were standing four feet from the ground on stilts. Deftly they secured the upper ends of the stilts to their hips by means of thongs and, having rendered themselves independent of the need to use their hands to hold their “elevating machines,” they brandished their weapons and shook their shields without endangering their stability.

“Surely the fools aren’t going to attack on stilts?” thought Ken.

They were. For the third time the horn sounded its discordant note. A chorus of yells broke from the hitherto silent ring of enemies, as, covering their bodies with their shields, they commenced the ascent of the hill.

The sharp crack of Ken’s rifle was out-voiced by the rapid double detonation of his chum’s 12-bore. At eighty yards the No. 5 shot spread with disconcerting although relatively harmless effect, and Hayes had been cool enough to remember to shift his objective after the first shot. Quite possible Ken missed, but the joint result of the fire was hardly the less effective.

True the savages’ shields protected their bodies from the flying dust-shot, but the unexpected

experience of feeling the leaden pellets peppering their legs and arms was disconcerting in the extreme. Quite half a dozen crashed ungracefully, and their stilts being secured to their legs they were unable to rise. Some of them lay kicking frantically. Others terrified by the hitherto unknown noise of the firearms and the widely-spread hail of small shot cowered face downwards on the ground. Those on either side of the gap in the circle hesitated, fearful lest a like fate befell them.

But that was only one small section of the encircling throng. Most of the attackers, although they heard the noise of the firing, were unable to see what had happened. Temporarily the outer edge of the crater had hidden their would-be victims from them; but already a dozen or more had scaled the hill and were threatening a rear attack. They had climbed the stiff ascent in quick time in spite of being hampered with stilts. On level ground their speed would be three times as fast.

Swinging round, Hayes got in a couple of shots in rapid succession, while Ken, who had already loosed off the contents of his magazine, drew his automatic. At that distance it was almost impossible to miss. Gerald's shot-gun was at a disadvantage, since the shots had no time to spread. They hit in a frantically compact mass, cutting a clean hole through the shield of one of the foremost savages and sending him toppling down the slope with his chest blown in.

Far more efficacious were the loud reports of the double-barrelled gun. Ken's automatic made a fairly loud report and did considerable execution, and as soon as its magazine was empty he discarded it in favour of his rifle. Unable to waste time in recharging the magazine the lad had to load and fire with single cartridges. Even then the position was for a few moments desperate.

A savage, evidently a chief by reason of a cloak of feathers, came bounding toward him, towering high on his stilts. At ten paces Ken fired full at the man's massive chest. Unswervingly the chief continued his rush. Before Kilsyth could reload, the formidable club was poised for a deadly blow. Instinctively the lad raised his rifle to ward off the impending descent of the weapon, which in the powerful hands of the savage would probably smash both the rifle and Ken's skull with a single blow.

Then, even as the club quivered in mid-air, the chief toppled forward. As he did so, his stilts fell backwards. He collapsed, doubled up and on his face. His limbs twitched convulsively for a few moments.

Kilsyth stepped back a pace, reloaded and prepared to fire. But the fall of the chief had broken the attack. The natives hesitated, broke and fled, never stopping until they gained the shelter of the scrub.

Flushed with victory, the chums shook hands for the first time since they first met.

"Bit stiff while it lasted," remarked Hayes.

"Yes," agreed Ken. "But is it over? The blighters may make another attack. In any case they're between us and the ship."

"They don't seem to have much pluck," continued Hayes. "They ought to have rushed the pair of us hands down. And they hadn't time to stop and pick up their wounded."

"What beats me is why they came on stilts," remarked Ken. "They are tall enough as it is, without trying to make themselves taller. The question is, what's to be done with the wounded?"

As he spoke Kilsyth noticed a couple of severely wounded natives, who had contrived to descend the hill before collapsing, trying to crawl to shelter. It was a difficult task, hampered by the poles lashed to their waists and legs.

Before the two savages had covered twenty yards a number of their companions, who had now discarded their stilts, dashed from their place of concealment. Although neither Ken nor Gerald made any attempt to open fire, since the effort was obviously made to rescue the helpless men, the natives must have known the risk they ran.

Unmolested, they carried their wounded comrades to the shelter of the bush.

"Perhaps they'll take the other wounded," hazarded Ken, indicating ten or twelve men who had dropped either on the slope or the crest of the hill. "Let's make signs that we won't fire if they do."

The suggestion was acted upon. The chums waved their white handkerchiefs—actually they had once been white, but now they were hardly recognizable as such. No response came from the natives in the undergrowth. Silence brooded over the spot where they had taken refuge.

“Silly asses!” exclaimed Hayes contemptuously. “They funk it. Do you notice that they haven’t attempted to touch a single man on the slope of the hill? Yet they must have known they were within easy range when they carried off those two.”

“Well, hang it all!” declared his chum. “It’s up to us to do what we can for these chaps. We’ll have to be careful, though, in case they start hacking with those nasty-looking spears. You stand by with this automatic while I see if there’s anything to be done for the wounded.”

The first native to be examined was the chief. He was beyond mortal aid. The high-velocity bullet had entered his chest, making a minute hole. Where it had emerged was a cavity as big as a hen’s egg. The marvel was that the man had not dropped dead in his tracks instead of rushing on and nearly succeeding in clubbing his antagonist.

The next man they came to had an ankle badly lacerated by part of a charge of small shot fired at close range. To Ken’s astonishment the native was dead; yet there were no other wounds to be found anywhere on him.

Close to him lay another native, shot through

the head. Three paces away was yet another without the sign of an injury. He had been brought to the ground owing to one of his stilts being shattered. He, too, was stone dead.

So were all the rest who had fallen either on the slope or the summit of the hill. In many cases their visible injuries were quite of a minor character; yet they were dead.

"This beats me!" declared Ken. "Every fellow we've brought down, except the two they carried off, is as dead as a door-nail. Why?"

Hayes shook his head. Here was a mystery that required a lot of solving.

"Give it up," he rejoined. "The question is, how do we get back to the ship?"

"Perhaps the natives have collared her already," remarked Ken. "There's one thing: it would be madness to attempt to make our way through that brushwood. We'll have to sit tight a bit."

"No grub, no water," Hayes reminded him. "And perhaps they'll make another attack during the night."

"Night's a long way off," rejoined his chum optimistically. "Lots might happen before then."

Even as he spoke there was a movement in the scrub about a hundred yards away. A long dark object could be seen bobbing slightly as it appeared just above the top of the dense undergrowth. Presently it came into view—a fifty-

feet canoe borne on the shoulders of a double line of muscular natives.

They carried the canoe to the shore, uprighted it and plunged into the water until the long yet frail craft was afloat. Into it the crowd scrambled. Paddles were produced and wielded vigorously.

"They're off!" exclaimed Hayes.

Unswervingly the canoe held on, shaping a course for a gap in the reef. Soon she was pitching in the breakers, yet as buoyant as a cork, she shot ahead and gained the open sea. Half an hour later she was a mere speck on the skyline.

CHAPTER X

THE WAY BACK

“SCARED stiff!” exclaimed Hayes.

“Like we were when they started the racket,” added Ken.

“I vote we make tracks,” suggested his chum.

“Right-o!” agreed Kilsyth. “We’ll have to keep to the shore instead of cutting across the island.”

“Why?”

“In case the departure of the canoe is a ruse,” explained the other. “These chaps are pretty crafty. It’s likely they’ve left a crowd behind to catch us napping.”

“I never thought of that,” exclaimed Gerald. “I’d have strolled back as calmly as if I were on my way to Grabaul and Gett’s—or more so. You’re a smart chap, Ken, to think it all out. How you do beats me.”

“Don’t try to pull my leg,” protested Ken.

Hayes’ admiration for his chum was by no means assumed. He meant it; said so.

“It’s a sort of second nature to you,” he added. “One would think you’ve lived amongst savages all your life.”

“Let’s get a move on!” said Ken.

They descended the hill on its seaward face, and gaining the sand set out on their circuitous route for the place where they had left the boat.

With every sense on the alert they moved silently. Being low tide there was an expanse of fairly hard sand averaging twenty-five yards in width, although there were places where masses of dead coral and volcanic rock ran down almost to low water mark. Crowned with dense scrub these projections looked like possible shelter for an ambush party, and the prospect of being shot down by one of those formidable triple-barbed arrows was not to be lightly set aside.

"Look out!" exclaimed Hayes. "There's something moving!"

There was no mistaking that. The brushwood was swaying although there was no wind.

Without hesitation Ken levelled his rifle and fired. Three shots he sent in rapid succession. An uncanny silence followed the last echo of the reports. The brushwood continued to sway.

"What is it?" asked Hayes.

"Ask me another," replied his chum. "But we aren't going to be held up by that, whatever it is. Give me your gun. Take my rifle and keep a dozen paces behind me."

The exchange being effected, Ken led the way. Hayes with the rifle was less likely to plug him than if he had the 12-bore with its wide-spreading charge of small shot.

Cautiously Kilsyth edged round the projecting

bluff, keeping knee-deep in water in order to increase his distance.

Suddenly he stopped and emptied both barrels into the scrub. The tough tendrils were reversed by the powerful charge and the cause of the alarm was exposed.

It was a huge crab, measuring nearly a yard across the shell. One of its formidable pincers was shattered. The crustacean had received a mortal wound.

"Nice sort of island this!" remarked Hayes, regarding the crab with feelings akin to horror. "Fancy a brute like that getting hold of a fellow's leg. Isn't he a bit out of his native element?"

"After coco-nuts most likely," replied Ken. "They fell the trunks with their nippers and then make a meal of the nuts. I've heard of land crabs that climb trees. This chap is evidently a marine one ashore for a holiday. Come on."

"How about crab for supper?" asked Gerald, and setting down the rifle he severed the brute's claws with the axe.

The roundabout route was resumed. Projection after projection was passed without any cause for alarm or suspicion.

Skirting the north-eastern corner of the island they came in sight of the old *Mumtaz*. The whaler, having been left in a shallow bay, was still masked by a small promontory.

A few yards farther along their progress was arrested by a stream. At the spot where its

waters mingled with those of the lagoon, it was about twenty yards in width but relatively shallow, although here and there were deeper channels between the rocks. Higher upstream, the banks contracted but the water was correspondingly deeper.

"This is where we ought to have landed," said Ken. "Then we could have filled the breakers with fresh water without much trouble."

"Is it fresh?"

"Not here, perhaps, but higher up. Let's see. You stand by while I look."

Making his way upstream until he was well above the limit of the highest tides, Ken dropped his hand into the water. The liquid was perfectly sweet. He drank copiously. After weeks of tank water on board this tasted like nectar.

"It's top-hole water!" he declared, when he rejoined his chum. "You try it. I'll stand by while you're gone."

Hayes lost no time in doing so. Although only fifty yards from his chum, he was in full view, while Ken, rifle in hand, remained on the alert. Already he was fully convinced that the natives had really taken their departure; otherwise they would not have neglected the now almost lost opportunity of attacking the two lads from the cover of the dense undergrowth. Here there was nothing but a belt of sward on either bank, the nearest bushes being almost if not quite beyond arrow-flight.

Kneeling, Hayes placed the palms of his

hands together cup-fashion and dipped them into the cool, steadily-running stream.

Before he could remove them some dank, slimy thing fastened itself to the back of his right hand.

With a yell Hayes jumped to his feet, at the same time tearing wildly with his left hand at the slippery, tenacious thing that was firmly attached to his flesh.

For the moment Ken was under the impression that his chum had been wounded by a missile of some sort, until Hayes came bounding towards him.

"Tear the beastly thing off!" shouted the victim. "It's biting!"

Taking as firm a grip of the eel-like object as its slippery skin permitted, Kilsyth tugged and tugged in vain. The reptile was armed with a formidable array of suckers and the adhesive power was enormous. The more Ken tugged the more Hayes yelled, for the effort not only failed to dislodge the eel but increased the victim's excruciating agony.

"Can you keep still for half a minute?" asked Ken.

"Can I what?" shouted Hayes frantically. "I'd like to see you do it! Ough!"

"Well, will you try?" persisted his chum. "It's the only way I can think of."

Obtaining a half-hearted assent, Ken unloaded the rifle and after breaking out the bullet, placed the blank cartridge into the breech.

"Put your hand on that stone," he continued.
"I won't hurt you."

Hayes obeyed. If the truth be told he would not have minded being hurt a little. Anything was better than the pain of that blood-sucking eel.

Placing the muzzle of the rifle close to the loathsome creature's head, Ken pressed the trigger. Hayes leapt in the air as if he had been shot. The back of the hand was scorched by the burnt cordite, but the eel had been blown off except for a portion of the suckers. The power of adhesion lost, these were then removed with very little difficulty, leaving a patch of livid flesh.

"Does it hurt?" asked Kilsyth.

"Like billy-ho," replied his chum with a grimace. "Nothing like it did, though. Thanks, old son!"

"Still thirsty?"

"Rather."

Without another word Ken made his way upstream, removed his sun-helmet and dipped it in the water, taking particular care that his fingers did not offer a tempting bait for the leech-like eels.

"Good!" ejaculated Hayes after he had drunk from the unusual water-vessel. "I vote we fill up here before we go aboard. It won't be much trouble to get the boat to the mouth of this stream. Another time mightn't do, especially if the natives return in force."

The chums prepared to resume their way. A distance of about a couple of hundred yards separated them from the spot where the whaler lay, and they had also to cross the wide estuary where the stream merged into the lagoon.

The water was for the most part only ankle-deep, and the pair waded boldly until they came to a sort of gully about a yard across, beyond which a number of dark rocks and hummocks of coral showed either just above or below the rippling surface.

Holding his rifle, Ken leapt. His feet slithered on a slippery surface. Vainly he attempted to regain his balance. The "rock" was actually the shell of a large turtle. Alarmed by the impact of the lad's shoes, the turtle started to move, with the result that Kilsyth sprawled inelegantly on his back in eighteen inches of water.

At his chum's plight Gerald went off into peals of laughter. He simply couldn't help it.

Suddenly the laughter died on his lips. To his horror he caught sight of a long sinuous fish rapidly approaching the still floundering Kilsyth.

It was a ground-shark, a ferocious and bold fish that does not hesitate to attack human beings in water hardly deep enough for the brute to swim in.

Hayes realized that he had to act, and that quickly. Warning his chum of the peril that threatened him was useless. Only a short time previously Hayes would have been petrified with

fear and horror. Already, thanks to the changed conditions of life, he was developing a steady nerve. He had been dependent upon Ken, to a great extent, when in tight corners, but the lessons he had received had not been wasted.

Raising his 12-bore he emptied both barrels simultaneously, meeting the heavy recoil with a steady shoulder. At a range of about ten yards there was little room for the shots to spread. Almost in a compact mass the leaden pellets threw up a smother of foam.

When the cloud of spray subsided the water was tinged with blood. The jaws of the shark had been literally pulverized.

Ken regained his feet.

"What fool's game are you playing?" he demanded wrathfully. "Didn't I warn you to set the safety-catch? You nearly plugged me."

Gerald's reply was to point silently at the steadily spreading patch of crimson-hued water.

Ken realized his mistake.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed. "My error!"

"Quite all right," rejoined Hayes, as he ejected the empty cartridge cases and reloaded.

"We'll get back out of here," decided Ken. "We'll cross higher upstream—look! Hook it, sharp!"

The warning was imperative. Attracted probably by the reek of blood, half a dozen small but formidable ground-sharks were boldly approaching the scene of their brother's ill-fated but unlamented demise. The double report of

the gun had failed to scare them away. They scented food. Nothing else mattered.

The chums beat a hasty retreat. It was of little use to waste ammunition on a swarm of these ferocious fish; equally futile to continue the passage of the estuary in the deep runlets of which danger lurked.

A hundred yards upstream brought the chums to a sort of miniature cascade, the width from bank to bank being a little more than leaping distance. The depth looked about eighteen inches.

"Steady!" cautioned Hayes, seeing that his chum was about to wade across. "Remember those horrible leeches. I've had some; you haven't."

"Do you remember that revue we saw at Blackburn last November?" asked Ken.

"Pull up your Socks," you mean?"

"Yes; well, do it now," continued Kilsyth. "Pull 'em up over the bottoms of your trousers. I don't think a leech will get much of a hold on woollen stuff."

The water was deeper than it looked. It was almost thigh deep; but the chums came through without mishap. Gaining the other bank they began to make their way towards the beach.

"Hang on to my rifle for a tick while I wring out some of this water," said Ken, conscious of the fact that his saturated garments were beginning to impede his progress.

Gerald took the rifle and went on a few paces.

Then he stopped dead, paused and dropping the rifle, brought his 12-bore to his shoulder.

Within a few yards of him was a native. The man was partly hidden by a clump of tall grass. He was lying on his stomach, with his head raised slightly, as if his whole attention were centred upon the partly-sunken *Mumtaz*. By his right side lay a short but powerful bow, while a number of formidable triple-barbed arrows were stuck loosely in the ground within hand's reach. His hair was frizzed out, turban-like, while the whole of the visible part of his body and limbs was tattooed with weird devices. This was the only difference between him and the savages who had unsuccessfully attacked the hill; they had decorated their bodies with paint. His markings had been permanently injected into his light-olive coloured skin.

"What——?" began Ken, but Hayes silenced him by a gesture.

Snatching up his rifle, Kilsyth stood back to back with his chum. He had sufficient confidence in Gerald by this time to know that the latter had the savage covered; he also realized that the native might not be alone. Others might be lurking in the dense underground from which the chums had just emerged.

Apparently the fellow with the bow was awaiting his opportunity to shoot down the two whites as they made their way along the open shore. He had not counted upon their making a detour and approaching from behind.

Yet even as Hayes waited, finger on trigger, he felt puzzled. Somehow he could not bring himself to shoot down the unsuspecting native, although he guessed that the savage would not hesitate to drive one of those fearsome-looking arrows through either his or Ken's body.

The stillness of the lurking man seemed uncanny. During their progress across the stream and towards the beach the lads had made no attempt to restrain their voices or to tread silently. The savage must have heard them; why, then, did he not change his position?

Lowering his gun, Hayes picked up a stone and threw it at the prone figure. The missile struck the man fairly between the shoulder-blades with a dull thud. The native never stirred. There was not the slightest convulsive movement of his limbs.

Keeping the muzzle of his gun pointed at the man, Hayes approached. There was no need for caution on his account; the native was stone dead. His body was rigid. Life had been extinct for hours.

"Dead as mutton, Ken!" he exclaimed.

Kilsyth hurried up.

"So he is," he agreed. "He gave me a bit of a turn when I saw you covering him. I say, this island gets more and more mysterious every hour. Wonder how he was killed?"

They levered the corpse over on its back. Face and chest were pitted with small marks, each puncture clotted with dried blood.

"I know!" declared Ken. "That's the blighter who fired across at us last night. Look! The arrows are exactly like those we found sticking in the deck. We must have peppered him pretty badly when we fired at him."

"Yes, and then?"

"Well, he fell out of his canoe, swam ashore and died."

"You're wrong, Sherlock," declared Hayes. "Had he swum ashore the blood would have been washed off. 'Sides, those pellets haven't gone in very deep. Many a gamekeeper's been hit worse than that and made light of it. It's my belief he paddled ashore in his canoe."

"Where's the blessed canoe then?" asked Kilsyth, frankly sceptical concerning his chum's theories.

"Hidden in the brushwood, same as the other fellow's canoe," replied Gerald.

"All right; suppose it is. How do you account for the man being dead?"

Hayes shook his head.

"Give it up!" he answered gravely. "How did the natives on the hill die? Only a few of them had gunshot wounds sufficient to cause death, but none survived. Hang it all! I'd funk lying down on the ground of this hideous island after this. Can it be possible that the soil is deadly poisonous?"

"You might be right," conceded Ken. "Yet I don't know. How about the wounded fellows who were carried off by their pals? They had

their faces close enough to the ground. 'Tany rate I won't risk making the experiment just to prove the truth of your idea. Come on, let's make a move."

"I'll take the fellow's bow and arrows as souvenirs," declared Hayes.

"The bow, yes," agreed his chum, "but I'd give the arrows a miss if I were you. It's a hundred-to-one chance that they're poisoned."

A rustling of the brushwood attracted attention. Ambling towards the body of the native was a land-crab, a small and fearsome-looking creature of about twelve inches across the shell. Regardless of the presence of the living, the crab made for the dead.

Hayes was about to hurl a stone at the creature, but his companion restrained him.

"Wait!" he exclaimed.

The crab came on, found its path impeded by the arrows stuck in the ground. With a sharp crunch the powerful nippers gripped one of the shafts at the nearest of the three bone barbs. The arrow broke. The crab floundered triumphantly over the gaily-painted shaft, stopped, writhed for perhaps five seconds and then collapsed. The pincers dropped motionless on the ground. The hideous creature was dead—killed almost instantaneously by the subtle poison of the arrow head.

"I don't think I'll take the bow," remarked Hayes soberly. "Let's shove off out of here."

"I've heard a lot about the charms of coral

islands," said Ken, as they resumed their way to the shore, "but this one's a wash-out. Give me the old *Mumtaz* even if she's resting on the bottom of the lagoon."

Turning their backs upon the ill-omened spot the chums drew clear of the tussocks of coarse grass, traversed a wide belt of turf and gained the shore. Thankfully they drew in deep draughts of the ozone-laden air, for a gentle breeze had sprung up from seaward. That air, at any rate, was not polluted with the death-dealing vapours that seemed to hang over the island.

They found the whaler as they had left it. The tide had ebbed. The boat was high and dry. Being heavy and being sunk in the soft sand, she resisted all their efforts to get her afloat. They could not shift her so much as an inch.

"It'll be quite three hours before the tide makes high enough," declared Gerald.

"Dashed if I'm going to wait till then," declared Ken resolutely. "We'll get a couple of oars under her and roll her down."

By dint of great exertions, the oars were placed under the whaler's keel, other oars being tied fore and aft to serve as rough and ready launching-ways. Then, using the stretchers as levers the chums succeeded in getting the boat into the water.

"Pitch the gear into her!" exclaimed Ken breathlessly. "We've done enough for to-day. Let's get on board and have grub."

They threw the oars and other gear into the boat and pushed off. Even as they did so, Hayes gave a gasp of dismay and astonishment. Following the direction of his chum's outstretched arm, Ken, too, felt his heart in his throat; for coming through the gap in the outer reef were ten or twelve large canoes packed with armed natives.

CHAPTER XI

THE KING OF KILBA

“**P**PULL like blue blazes !” shouted Kenneth.
“Our only chance is to get aboard.
Pull, man, pull !”

Feverishly the two lads plied the heavy ash oars. As they rowed they could not resist the temptation to turn their heads and look over their shoulders in the direction of the impending danger.

The canoes were moving swiftly towards the half-sunken ship. Dozens of paddles beat the water with the regularity of clockwork. Groups of dusky armed men stood on the elevated platforms on the bow and stern of each craft, all gazing curiously at the unaccustomed sight of the mast, funnel, and upperworks of a steamship showing above water.

The flotilla came on in comparative silence. There was no shouting, no yelling of fierce war-cries. Save for the rhythmic beats of the paddles and the swishing of water at the long lean bows of the canoes, there was not a sound audible to the two chums as they frantically tugged at the oars.

Both lads quickly realized that they stood

little chance of winning the race. In spite of the greater distance of the canoes from the ship, they were moving at more than double the speed of the heavily built and greatly under-manned whaler. Yet, with the energy of despair, Kilsyth and his companion stuck gamely to their task, realizing that unless they gained the ship they were lost. Even should they succeed in so doing their chance of winning through was remote in the extreme; for what could two on the elevated and exposed and defenceless bridge hope to do against perhaps a thousand natives armed not only with spears and shields, but also with bows and deadly poisonous arrows.

A few more strokes and the bulk of the ship's upperworks interposed between the boat and most of the approaching canoes; yet a considerable distance had to be covered before the whaler ran alongside.

Well-nigh breathless, with rivulets of perspiration running down their faces and into their eyes, the lads toiled manfully until at last Ken shouted that there was "way 'nough," and allowed the boat to bump heavily alongside.

Without waiting to make the whaler's painter fast, the chums clutched their fire-arms, swung themselves over the rail, and tore for the bridge. Absolutely speechless and utterly exhausted they staggered to the doubtful sanctuary of the wireless room and shut and barricaded the steel door.

Then they waited for the opening of the

impending attack. From without came a babel of voices. The restraint hitherto imposed upon the swarm of natives had broken down. Probably having never before seen a vessel of any description other than their outrigger canoes, the sight of the huge ship, although the greater part of her was under water, filled them with amazement—and amongst the simple-natured Pacific Islanders amazement is accompanied by violent gesticulations and loud chatter.

Not for one moment did the chums consider the idea of parleying with the seemingly hostile crowd. Already their experience of this out-of-the-way group of islands had taught them that the distance of brute force was the paramount factor ending in the inevitable woe to the vanquished.

Opening one of the scuttles, Ken peered out cautiously. The list of the ship enabled him to have a clear view from close alongside. The canoes had apparently taken up a circular formation, for all those within Ken's field of vision were lying motionless, end to end. The natives were making no effort to board the derelict vessel.

"What's to be done?" asked Hayes. "We can't stop here indefinitely. Can't we hurry things up a bit? This inaction is too jolly sickening."

"Can't see that we can do much," replied Kilsyth. "They haven't attacked us, and I suppose they've as much right to be here as we

have—perhaps more. If they attempt to climb aboard we'll fire over their heads as a warning. If that won't scare 'em stiff——”

“What then?”

“Fight to the last. I say, old man, I'm sorry I've got you into the mess.”

Hayes turned on his chum.

“Shut up!” he exclaimed savagely. “You've talked like that before. I'm not grouching. After all, it hasn't been a bad time——”

The noise without died suddenly. An ominous silence fell upon the crowd of natives. To the two waiting and listening lads it seemed as if, all preparations completed, the armed occupants of the flotilla of canoes were about to assail the helpless *Mumtaz* on all sides.

Suddenly a solitary voice broke the silence—a hail in quavering but unmistakable English.

“Ahoy there!” it shouted. “Can I come aboard?”

Ken and Gerald hit their heads together smartly as they attempted to see out of the scuttle at the same time. The second effort was more successful, although each could make use of one eye only, since the circular opening was only nine inches in diameter.

Seated on the raised poop of the nearest canoe was a white man. White he undoubtedly was in the accepted sense of the word, although his face and painfully thin body were tanned to a deep rich mahogany by reason of exposure to the sun and salt air. He was nearly bald, with a

tonsure-like ring of silvery white hair. His beard was long and also of the same hue. His face was covered with innumerable wrinkles, while heavy bushy eyebrows overhung a pair of light blue eyes. His nose was straight and rather prominent. Except for a kilt-like garment of plaited rushes he wore no clothing, but around his neck was a necklet of shark's teeth. Unlike the natives about him he was unarmed, but carried in his right hand a small white rod to which was lashed a cluster of scarlet hibiscus flowers.

"Ahoy there!" shouted Ken, replying in a voice that he hardly recognized as his own.

"Safe to come aboard?" inquired the old man, indicating the frayed black and yellow plague flag.

"Quite—if your people are friendly," replied Kilsyth.

"They are," was the prompt rejoinder. "You need fear nothing from them."

He turned and said something to the stalwart natives standing beside them. Instantly their right hands were upheld in token either of salutation or of their peaceable intentions; while at the same time the double line of oarsmen raised their paddles to the accompaniment of a deep and not unmelodious tune.

Without further hesitation the chums removed the barricade, unbolted and threw open the door. Then they stepped to the end of the bridge, which, owing to the list and to the state of the

tide, was only about three feet above the surface of the water.

The chiefs, as they undoubtedly were, attending upon the hoary white man had laid their weapons on the raised after deck of the canoe. At a word the paddlers urged the long narrow craft alongside with her outrigger farthest from the ship's side.

The old man, amid marks of respect from his olive-hued companions, stepped across to the bridge of the *Mumtaz*, moving with an agility that belied his age.

"I had given up hope of treading the bridge of a British ship or even any ship," he began in rather halting and laborious English. "This is a pleasure, although your craft seems to be—to be just a little unseaworthy."

"She is," admitted Ken readily. "We happen to be the only survivors. Might we ask your name?"

"My name?" re-echoed the old man in a quavering voice. "My name? I have almost forgotten it. Once, long ago, it was Walsh—Richard Walsh. Now I am called Meka Kilba. In English: the King of Kilba. What year is it?" he asked abruptly.

Kilsyth told him.

For nearly a minute there was silence. The white King of Kilba was racking his brains in order to work out a sum in mental arithmetic.

"That makes me out nearly eighty years

old ! ” he exclaimed, as if aghast at the discovery. “ And I thought I was not yet seventy.”

“ Well, you don’t look it,” said Ken gallantly. “ Won’t you sit down ? ”

He fetched a camp-chair from the captain’s cabin, and placed it on the sloping planks. The old man accepted it gratefully. He was still bewildered by the shock of discovering his actual age.

“ Have you lived about here for a long time ? ” asked Hayes.

“ Yes,” replied the King. “ For a very long time.”

He was evidently in a reminiscent mood and glad of the opportunity of talking about himself in his native tongue. Curiosity concerning the two survivors of the S.S. *Mumtaz* was quite a minor consideration. Once he “ got going ” he talked as fast as his long-neglected use of English permitted.

“ Since the year 1871, I have been here amongst these islands,” he began. “ In January of that year—Paris was besieged by the Prussians at that time—I left the Thames as third mate of the *Diamond*, bound for Amoy. We were seven weeks trying to beat round the Horn, I remember. In August we got caught in an unexpected white squall. We were under all plain sail and the squall took us all aback. The ship lay right over on her beam ends and was gone before you could say ‘ Jack Robinson.’ I got hold of a hen-coop that had carried away. There was another man

with me—Cartwright, of the carpenter's crew, was his name, I remember. After a bit we found one of the boats floating bottom-up. We struck out for her, and as the squall had blown itself out we managed to get the boat upright. In her was a barrel of biscuits and about a gallon of fresh water in a barrico, which being almost empty had jammed against the bottom-boards when she capsized.

"Cartwright died about ten days later. I was pretty well done when the boat grounded on Kilba—that island you may have seen away to the nor'-east. The natives found me and managed to bring me round. There was another white man on the island, a chap called Svensen or something like that. He was a Dane who had been cast ashore there some forty years before and they'd made him king.

"When he died, a matter of four or five years after I got cast ashore there—you'll know I hadn't been able to keep an accurate account of time—they pushed me into his job, and ever since then I've been King of Kilba. It's not at all a bad sort of thing to be King of Kilba, only it's a life affair. There's no getting away from that."

"How's that?" asked Ken sharply.

"Because what chance has a man to get away? No vessel ever comes near the group. There are reefs for miles and not any of them charted. 'Tis a marvel this hooker drove in so far as she did. She wouldn't have got within

twelve or fifteen miles of Kilba or Neka, without bumping on a submerged reef. So the white kings of Kilba just keep on till they die. I succeeded Svensen; Svensen took on after a white man whose name I've forgotten. That must have been a hundred years or more ago. Now my reign's nearly up and a white successor must be named. It must be one of you two."

"How's that?" asked Hayes, none too pleased at the information. "Suppose we hadn't been driven ashore here? That there was not a white man to continue the succession: what then?"

"There always will be," declared the King with absolute conviction in his tone. "The natives have a belief that it is so, and they haven't been wrong so far. They have a saying that Kilba will be ruled by white chiefs who will be able to keep the people of Neka away from the island until Neka is at last subjected. Then, say the wise men of Kilba, the last white king, his work accomplished, will be taken up into the sky in a winged chariot. That, of course, is an impossibility; so it means that the succession of white kings of Kilba will go on and on."

"Why should it be an impossibility?" asked Ken.

The old man glanced sharply at him. "Because it must be," he replied. "How can there be such a thing as a winged chariot. There are balloons, of course. They were using them in the Siege of Paris before I left England. But that is not the same thing."

"Why—of course! You wouldn't know!" exclaimed Hayes. "You've never heard of aeroplanes?"

"What are they?"

"Sort of—sort of winged chariots. Machines with wings, and driven by an air propeller worked by a motor," explained Gerald.

The old man eyed the lad suspiciously, as if the latter were indulging in the time-honoured practice of "pulling a fellow's leg."

"Hayes is quite right about what he's told you," said Ken, coming to his chum's aid. "Why, in the Great——" He broke off abruptly. The King of Kilba, of course, knew nothing of the Great War and of its world-wide consequences. It was of little use trying to spring too many surprises on him at once. "Why, only a short time ago three aeroplanes—machines heavier than air that means—flew right round the world."

"Then perhaps there's a chance of escape for me," remarked the King in an undertone.

A moment later the subject seemed to have no further interest for him. His eyes caught sight of the rifle Ken had placed on the top of the signal-locker.

"That's good!" he exclaimed. "What sort of rifle is that? When I left England they had just brought out a new one—the Snyder. Is that a breech-loader?"

"Yes, with a magazine," explained Ken. "There are five cartridges in that metal box."

“How far will it carry?”

“It’s sighted to 2,000 yards,” replied the lad.

“It will carry even farther than that.”

“Show me,” said the ruler of Kilba peremptorily.

“Won’t it frighten your men?”

“No, I will warn them,” was the reply.

Ken levelled the rifle seawards. Ammunition was plentiful, yet it seemed a pity to waste it, unless, of course, the moral effect would impress the natives.

He emptied the magazine in five seconds.

“That will be most useful when the men of Neka come,” remarked the King amidst the astonished grunts of the natives in the canoes.

“Young men, it is useless for you to remain on an almost sunken ship. At Kilba much is waiting for you to do, for already the men of Neka are preparing to invade us. That we know, for many of them, including the Chief Tia-Na, have come to the island to offer sacrifices to their gods. It is to drive them off this island that we have come here.”

“You’re too late,” said Ken. “We—Hayes and I—have made them clear out already.”

CHAPTER XII

A HUMAN DERELICT

“**W**HAT is that?” demanded the King, rising to his feet with remarkable agility, taking into consideration his age. Seated, he looked frail; standing, there were still signs of strength and even agility in his meagre, bony frame.

“We beat them off,” said Ken again. “A whole crowd of them tried to rush the hill we were standing on.”

“What sort of warriors were they?” asked the white chief.

“Tall, bedaubed with paint. The strange thing about them was that they fought on stilts.”

“The hill!” exclaimed the King. “What did you find there?”

“Bones,” replied Kilsyth grimly.

“Remains of two of my men, then,” declared the King. “We are too late, it seems. One of our canoes arrived at Kilba early this morning with one of the warriors missing. They reported to me that the men of Neka were here.”

“I think we can tell you about the missing man,” said Gerald. “He’s lying in the reeds over there.”

Hayes was about to add the information of how the native had received a charge of small shot as he shot arrows at the *Mumtaz*, but a warning look from his chum silenced him.

"Why did the men of Neka use stilts?" asked Ken.

"Because of sheer su—super——"

"Superstition," prompted Ken.

"Yes, that's it. The hill you see from here—the one where you found the stone of sacrifice—is held to be *tabu*. That is, no one must touch it and live. So they get round that difficulty by keeping their feet clear of the ground by using stilts."

"We made some of them touch the ground," declared Hayes. "They were all dead when we went to them, and some were only slightly hit."

"They killed themselves because of the *tabu*," explained the King. "Every Nekan warrior carries a small supply of *etai*—a very strong poison—for use in such cases. Now I must tell my people the news. It seems that our voyage here is wasted in one way, but in another it isn't."

The King stepped to the end of the bridge and raised his hand. Already the canoes had abandoned their circular formation and were grouped close alongside—the larger war canoes gunwale to gunwale; those with outriggers, being of a smaller type, occupying the nearest berths between the war canoes and the ship.

"Meka Kilba—the native name for Richard Walsh—spoke in a loud and strong voice that easily carried to the hearing of the farthestmost

of his dusky subjects. The speech sounded melodious. The chums noticed that almost every word ended in a vowel.

At the termination of the King's address every native raised his right hand, bringing it down smartly and with a resounding smack against his muscular chest.

"You will come to Kilba with me," said the King peremptorily. "It is useless for you to stop here. To-night we will spend here so that we can remove any gear likely to be of use. There's not much of the old hooker to be seen, but it seems good to tread the deck of a ship again. Hello! Where did those come from?"

He pointed to a couple of arrows lying against the rise of the chart-house.

"Some one fired them at us last night," replied Ken.

"It was a mistake then. The man knew no better. I must find him out and make him say he is sorry."

"That'll take some doing, I fancy," thought Kenneth. "It's beyond the power of the King of Kilba."

The white King began his tour of inspection by looking into the captain's cabin. The only thing that he commented upon was the lighting arrangement. He could not understand how an oil lamp without a wick could burn in a small enclosed glass, and when the chums explained that the ship was electrically lighted he looked completely puzzled.

"No, it doesn't require a match," said Ken. "We just touch this switch. Of course it's not acting now 'cause the dynamos are not working."

But it was the wireless room that taxed the King's powers of belief, and when the chums explained that it was possible to communicate with another ship over a distance of seven hundred miles, he grunted suspiciously.

"You don't think I believe that," he remarked.

"Why, it's possible to hear music and voices in London," added Hayes.

"Then let me hear it," said the King.

Gerald plunged into a long explanation as to why the set wasn't working, but the old man cut him short.

"You tell me of wonderful things," he remarked freezingly, "but every one of them are not working. Have you anything that is?"

Hayes looked inquiringly at his chum. The King's complaint was apparently well-founded.

"Get the captain's gramophone," suggested Ken. "Have you ever heard of a gramophone, sir?" he added.

"What is that?" asked the old man. "Something that isn't working also?"

Hayes unearthed the instrument. Neither of the lads was keen on it, and hitherto since the Old Man's death the gramophone had lain neglected in one of the lockers under the bunk.

The instrument was brought out and placed on deck. It was of the hornless variety. Gerald wound it up.

"Would you like to hear the latest revue?" he inquired politely.

"How can a man hear a review?" demanded the King impatiently. "The last review I saw was on Southsea Common in '69, I think. But of course there were military bands."

Without another word, Hayes put on a record of the Grenadier Guards' band. For a few seconds the needle scratched horribly upon the disc.

"Is that music?" inquired Kilba's ruler. "If so——"

The crash of the opening bars of a stirring military march cut short his protests. The result exceeded the chums' expectations. For a few moments the old man looked dumbfounded, then he commenced to dance. The natives were equally astonished. They, too, started to dance until the flotilla of canoes rocked perilously under the energetic efforts of the delighted warriors.

"Wonderful!" ejaculated the King, when the record came to an end.

"It's not a patch on wireless broadcasting," declared Hayes. "I suppose you'd like to take this to Kilba? There are nearly a hundred records—these round plates of wax."

The old man in high good-humour agreed.

"Can I make it play?" he added.

"Yes, rather," replied Hayes emphatically, for he rather dreaded the prospect of having to spend most of his time grinding up a gramophone for the amusement of his host.

The King followed Gerald to the captain's

cabin, where the rest of the records were stowed. As he did so, he noticed a barometer on the bulkhead.

For nearly forty-five years this derelict seaman had not set eyes upon a barometer, but the nautical instinct still remained.

"The glass is falling like billy-ho!" he exclaimed. "We're in for a blow!"

Without waiting to hear Hayes' opinion on the matter, the old man went to the end of the bridge and said something to the assembled chiefs. Although the chums couldn't understand the language, it was evident to them by the gestures and anxious looks to wind'ard that the subject was that of an approaching hurricane. Not that there were any indications in the sky. Not a cloud was visible. Hardly a ripple disturbed the placid surface of the lagoon.

"It will blow big guns in the night," announced the King, turning to Ken and Gerald. "Even the reef will not protect the ship. She'll be junk by the morning. If we are to save anything we must get it ashore at once."

"All right, sir," replied Kilsyth. "We haven't any objection."

"It wouldn't make the slightest difference if you had," rejoined the King with a touch of dignity. "Now, look here. I'm telling off four men as your personal servants. Point out your gear, and they'll take it ashore. I will put a *tabu* on it and no one will touch a thing except your servants. And, remember; the less you do

yourselves and the more you let these men do the better. The natives will think all the more of you. . . . Now, I'll call the men. One of them speaks English of sorts."

The four natives came on board. They were fine-featured, good-tempered men, tall, muscular, but their faces were marred by fantastic tattoo marks. As the King had declared, one of them spoke a sort of English which consisted of a limited vocabulary with a vowel tacked on to almost every word. The King, it appeared, had taught several of his subjects to make use of several English words.

In double quick time the chums' belongings, including the rifle, the two shot-guns, cartridges, bedding, clothes and other effects were passed over the side into a canoe and were then taken to the beach.

Not until this was done did the King give the word for the other natives to come on board. When he did they simply swarmed everywhere, stripping or cutting away everything likely to be of value or service and bundling the gear into the canoes. Even the wire rigging, the ropes and the canvas screens and "dodgers" were unshipped. Yet, in spite of the desperate haste of the workers, there was no suggestion of looting. Everything was taken with the idea of saving it from the ravages of the coming storm. The natives, admirably disciplined by this ancient representative of the British Mercantile Marine, were fighting a battle against time.

Well before sunset the S.S. *Mumtaz* presented a more desolate appearance than before. Only the gaunt outlines of bridge, funnel, masts and poop remained. Even the copper steam-pipe had disappeared from the smoke-stack. Possibly, had time allowed, the masts would have been cut through and towed ashore.

Then came the task of securing the canoes. Some of them were between fifty and sixty feet in length, with high prows decorated in barbaric fashion. Each in turn was hauled well above high-water mark by the united efforts of the natives. They used no tackle although there were blocks and cordage in plenty from the ship. By sheer brute force the ponderous craft were lifted, dragged and pushed up the shelving beach and berthed amidst the scrub.

The while the King of Kilba looked on and shouted directions. Ken and Gerald, mindful of the old man's warning, also looked on, but refrained from giving orders although it went hard against their inclinations not to take an active part in the operations.

As night fell huge fires were lighted and the natives had a meal consisting of baked pigs and taro.

The King of Kilba joined the chums at supper. It was the first time for years that he had tasted European food, and on this occasion Ken saw that a plentiful selection of the ship's provisions was forthcoming. The lads were ravenously hungry. They had been intent upon a meal on their return

to the *Mumtaz* that afternoon, but the sudden and unexpected arrival of the canoes from Kilba had driven all thought of food away until now.

For a few minutes the King plied knife and fork assiduously. He bungled the business badly, as he fumbled awkwardly with the once familiar articles. Finally he threw down the knife and fork and seized the tinned meat with his fingers and conveyed the pieces to his mouth.

"It's beyond me!" he remarked dolefully. "I'll never get accustomed to a knife and fork again, so perhaps it will be best if the 'winged chariot' doesn't come to take me away from my little kingdom."

At length the camp retired to rest. Each man lay down with his weapons by his side, reposing on a mat of woven grass. The huge fires were kept burning, while sentries with flaming torches patrolled the bivouac in order to scare away any land crabs that might disturb the sleepers.

The King, like his subjects, slept in the open on a woven mat; but Ken and Gerald took the precaution of using their hair mattresses spread on tarpaulins and with a square of canvas spread over a spar to keep off the night dews.

Tired in mind and body and yet with an absolute sense of security, the chums were soon in a sound dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER XIII

THE HURRICANE

A FURIOUS blast of wind that whisked the canvas awning away like a withered leaf before an autumn gale roused both lads from their deep slumber. For some moments they were unable to realize where they were. After many an anxious night on the bridge of the now abandoned tramp it was strange to find themselves lying on solid ground, stranger still to gaze upward at clouds of flame-tinged smoke and showers of glowing sparks that shot past overhead with the velocity of an express train to the accompaniment of the dismal howling of the wind and the jabbering of a crowd of excited natives.

Ken and Gerald had "turned in all standing," even to their shoes. They sprang to their feet. Exposed to the full force of the hurricane they promptly sat down again without the option of doing anything else.

The natives, too, appeared to be pinned to the ground by the almost irresistible strength of the wind. A few had contrived to reach the lee side of the canoes, which in spite of their weight, were showing signs of lifting to the force of the hurricane. The flames of the fires were deflected

until they appeared to lick the ground for several yards, while, in addition to the shower of sparks, blazing logs, tossed upon the eddying air-current, were being hurled to lee'ard like blazing comets, scattering the affrighted natives right and left.

Nor was the noise of the elements hardly less terrifying. The shriek of the wind, the thunder of the surf upon the shore—for in the violent gale the coral reefs formed but little protection—the constant rumble of the thunder and the *swish* of the reeds in the hellish blast, all combined to add to the horrors of the night.

Sheets of water descended upon the camping-ground. It was not raining. It was the spray from the crested breakers caught by the wind and driven anywhere up to a hundred yards from the beach. Clouds of steam mingled with dense volumes of smoke from the now damped wood enveloped everything and every one; while in a few minutes after the chums had been roused, flash after flash of lightning seemed to strike the saturated ground time after time until the earth seemed to be emitting bluish electrical flares.

Ken and his chum remained flat upon the ground, soaked with smoky salt spray and unable to understand a single word even when they shouted into each other's ears. One by one they saw their various pieces of baggage whisked from the pile and carried out of sight. They could do nothing to prevent it. Even an ordinary-sized suit-case hurled in the grip of the wind—the rate of which was not far short of 150 miles an hour

—was a dangerous missile that would break a limb or crush a rib should an attempt be made to check its headlong course.

Yet in the midst of this furious turmoil the natives were not wholly inactive; for when the endmost of the line of canoes showed signs of being lifted from its bed by the force of the wind, one of the sentinels gave a warning. The alarm was raised not by word of mouth—that would have been inaudible—but by waving his spear. The signal was seen by several of the hitherto motionless men. Fifty or more battled their way to the now quivering craft. Once the wind got underneath its hull the canoe would have been lifted and thrown to the ground in a shattered condition.

Of the fifty natives about half hung on to the gunwales. The rest, scooping up sand or picking up stones, began piling the weighty material on the bottom of the canoe until once more it rested securely in its bed amongst the wind-flattened reeds.

During the storm the King of Kilba had shown how the ruler of the tribe should face danger. In spite of his age and relative weakness he had scorned to take cover. Setting his back against a heavy chest that had been brought ashore from the *Mumtaz*, he remained facing the hurricane, regardless of the flying debris.

Kilsyth could not help admiring the stoical attitude of the man. Even as he looked, the lad noticed a native crawling towards the spot where

the King stood. In the glare of the lightning, Ken realized that the man was not one of the Kilba Islanders. They were tattooed. He was bedaubed with ochre. In his right hand he grasped a triple-barbed spear.

Although the Kilba Islanders used triple-barbed arrows their spears were invariably single headed with broad blades of green stone. This fact gave Ken additional reason for supposing the native to belong to the party that had made a vain attack upon the two chums at the hill of sacrifice.

Uttering an unheard warning, Ken jumped to his feet and ran downward to intercept the would-be assassin. There was no time for the lad to find his rifle, nor to withdraw his automatic pistol from its holster, release the safety-catch and cock the weapon.

So swiftly did Kilsyth act that Hayes never noticed his movements until the latter saw his chum at grips with the native.

A tackle on many a hard-fought Rugby game at home had taught Ken a useful lesson. With an impetuous rush he collared his man low. Before the savage realized the danger, although instinctively he shortened his spear, to thrust at the human thunderbolt, Ken grappled with him, gripping the fellow just below the knees.

Unfortunately Kilsyth had not taken into consideration the slippery nature of the native's oiled and painted skin. The hold was only partly successful.

White man and savage crashed headlong to the ground. A numbing pain shot through Ken's right shoulder. His grip relaxed. The native kicked furiously, at the same time shifting his grasp of the spear to about a foot from the triple-barbed head.

A shower of burning embers descended upon the combatants. The heat of the sizzling wood made Ken wince ; but it seemed to have no effect upon his ferocious antagonist.

Vainly the lad tried to shift his grip and grasp the native's right wrist. Up went the terrible spear to make a short, powerful jab. In another moment the triple barbs, smeared with a deadly poison, would be buried in the British lad's body.

CHAPTER XIV

KENNETH'S REWARD

BECAUSE he was being tackled and worsted by a bigger and stronger opponent, Ken Kilsyth did not "throw up the sponge." He was not that type. He had plenty of pluck and the Briton's characteristic attitude of not knowing when he was beaten.

Yet the odds were tremendously against him. His injured shoulder rendered his right arm powerless. He knew, too, that the spear was poisonous. The slightest scratch would have precisely the same result in the long run as a mortal blow, although in the former case death would follow after an excruciating period.

If he were to work out his own salvation, then he must depend upon his left hand, and at the same time avoid the terrible weapon that threatened him.

Even as the spear was shortened, Ken let out with his left. He was a hard hitter. At school one of his favourite "show pieces" was to split a panel of a door with a blow with his fist—a fairly simple performance provided the knuckles are kept level and the blow delivered at an imaginary point, an inch or so on the far side of the panel.

Ken struck. He aimed for the point of the native's jaw, missed it by a mere fraction of an inch and expended the blow by catching the man on the underside of his nose.

The savage winced, but the blow had very little effect. It would have knocked a white man silly. But it did result in delaying the murderous spear thrust for a brief moment.

That moment saved the situation as far as Ken was concerned. One of the lad's servants—a hulky native nearly six feet three in height—threw one arm round the Neka man from behind. Simultaneously the Kilba man's knee was planted fairly in the centre of the other native's back.

There was a sickening snapping sound accompanied by a hideous yell. Ken's antagonist, almost in the twinkling of an eye, had been transformed from a virile specimen of humanity into a corpse.

Kilsyth attempted to regain his feet. His rescuer, placing a broad hand on his chest, forced him back. The devoted native knew that the poisoned spear was close to the injured youth. Not until he had buried the deadly barbs deep in the sandy ground did the man assist his master to rise.

But for his aid, Ken would have been thrown down again by the terrific wind. The huge, powerfully built native seemed proof against the fury of the hurricane. Shielding his charge with his enormous bulk the native assisted him to the shelter of one of the largest canoes.

Hayes, crawling and battling with the elements, rejoined his chum. He was trembling with excitement, for, now that he realized that Ken had come off comparatively lightly, the reaction made him feel inclined to laugh and cry.

Ken, too, was feeling decidedly queer. His arm was hanging helplessly. He felt sick, possibly because he was not used to hearing a man's spine snap.

"What's the matter with your arm?" asked Hayes, for under the lee of the canoe conversation was possible.

"Collar-bone, I fancy," replied Ken. "Where's the King?"

Hayes shook his head.

An eddy current of air blew aside the swirl of steam and smoke and enabled the chums to see the spot where the white King of Kilba had been. He was no longer there.

"How much longer is this going to last?" asked Hayes. "I never thought there could be such a force in the wind."

"Good job we weren't on the *Mumtaz* when the storm burst," said Ken. "It would have taken us entirely by surprise. Wonder if she's sticking it?"

Just then five stalwart natives emerged from the smoke. Three of them with linked arms walked abreast. Behind them the remaining two were carrying something between them.

The "something" was the King of Kilba, his frail body protected from the wind by a living barricade formed by the three warriors.

“Very plucky of you!” exclaimed the King. “I had no idea of the Neka man’s presence until I saw you throw yourself upon him. Kaula, your servant, has done well. It was a smart piece of work. He tells me you are injured. This man here (indicating one of the five natives) is good at bone-setting. He will see to your injury.”

At a word from the King the native stepped up to Ken and looked at him. The lad had not given the man any indication of the nature of his injury, yet after a brief inspection the native produced a knife made of bone, and proceeded to cut away Kilsyth’s saturated shirt. This he did so gently and dexterously that the lad was hardly aware of what was being done.

In less than a minute the bone was re-set and the abrasion anointed with oil. Instead of placing the arm in a sling the native kneaded two lumps of whitish clay and wrapped them in broad leaves. These were pressed firmly against the fracture and secured with split bamboos.

It looked a clumsy bit of work, but the King nodded approval.

“You’ll be quite well in half a moon,” he declared confidently. “That is about fourteen days, for at Kilba we reckon time by the age of the moon. Now, lie down and rest. The storm is on the point of breaking.”

Kilsyth obeyed. He was feeling curiously drowsy and comfortable. The soothing effect of the balm was working already.

"I wonder what makes him think the storm is breaking?" he mused. "If anything it's worse than ever."

A minute or so later, Ken was lost in a deep and dreamless slumber.

The King of Kilba was right, for almost as suddenly as it had arisen, the storm died down. The furious roar of the wind tailed off into a gentle murmur. The coppery-coloured clouds rolled away and the stars shone with all the accustomed brilliance of the Tropics until without hardly any twilight day succeeded night.

Ken still slept. Hayes, remaining by his chum's side with almost dog-like devotion, felt grateful for the growing heat of the sun. He, too, felt very tired; too tired even to take an interest in his surroundings until it occurred to him to look and see how the *Mumtaz* had fared.

Making his way past the methodically arranged line of canoes, Hayes ascended a gentle rise between the high and dry craft and the lagoon. The water inside the reefs was now as calm as a millpond, although the coral barriers were lashed with foaming breakers. Between the beach and the nearest reef the water of the lagoon was unbroken—the S.S. *Mumtaz* had vanished.

Well above ordinary high-water mark the shore was littered with wreckage. Every piece of timber bore traces of the terrific hammering it had undergone. Deck planks, cabin furniture, masts—in fact everything capable of floating had come ashore in a battered condition. A human being

in that turmoil of angry sea mingled with heavy pieces of flotsam would not have stood the proverbial chances of a cat.

Hayes shuddered at the sight. Then he felt glad—happy to be alive.

Meanwhile the natives were busily engaged in getting their morning meal and preparing to launch their canoes.

The reason for this scene of activity was soon forthcoming. The King of Kilba explained the situation.

“We came here expecting to surprise and defeat a powerful force of Nekas under their chief Tia-Na,” he began. “Once Tia-Na is accounted for, it will be possible to live in peace with the Nekas. For years he has been trying to overcome us, but without success—or at least any lasting success. It seems as if our scouts had over-estimated the number of Nekas who left their island in their war canoes; for, if they had not, the number would be too many for you two to put to flight. Now the situation is rather hazardous for us. With the exception of two hundred warriors left to defend Kilba all our available men are here. If Tia-Na knows this he will make a descent upon Kilba with every available warrior. He is not to be despised, the Tia-Na.”

“Perhaps it was Tia-Na who lies dead on the hill of sacrifice,” suggested Gerald.

“Let us hope for all our sakes you are right,” rejoined the King gravely. “While we are waiting for the sea to moderate—no canoe could live



in the breakers beyond the reefs, and it's shoal water almost every mile from here to Kilba—we'll walk over to the hill of sacrifice and see if I can recognize the body. Your friend Kilsyth is rousing, I see. He will be in time for an interesting—what do you call it?—I know, ceremony."

Ken came over to the place where the King and Hayes were talking. He felt considerably refreshed. All sense of fatigue had left him. His injured collar-bone did not hurt him in the least; but there was a warm tingling sensation which indicated that, under the powerful influence of the healing balm, the fracture was rapidly mending.

The three conversed until the natives had finished their repast, then at a signal from the King the headmen summoned their respective *talas* or clans. With the utmost celerity and without undue commotion each warrior took up his allotted station until the chums were surrounded by a square of fighting men standing four deep.

For about a couple of minutes the King harangued his subjects, speaking the melodious tongue with less effort than it took to express himself in his native English.

At the end of the speech one part of the ordered ranks opened and four warriors appeared carrying the corpse of Ken's late antagonist.

The body was laid almost at the King's feet and placed face downwards. One of the natives pointed with his spear at a peculiar mark tattooed on the right shoulder of the Neka. It was a rough representation of an anchor.

Both lads realized that considerable importance had been attached to this mark. Unlike the Kilbas, the Nekas did not go in for tattooing, but followed the more primitive custom of be-daubing their bodies with ochre.

The mark on the Neka's shoulder had been placed there by the Kilbas. It was an indication that at some previous time the man had been taken prisoner.

The Neka Islanders invariably killed and ate their captives. The Kilbas used to until the present King's predecessor put a stop to the revolting practice. Prisoners were then kept as slaves. Richard Walsh, when he became King, showed that he was no mean judge of native mentality. The slaves became so numerous that their masters showed a tendency to become idle. They were in danger of losing their efficiency. In addition the Nekas held captive by the Kilba Islanders never lost their resentment towards their masters. The two races were as distinct as oil and water. In times of war they were a distinct menace to the recruiting of Kilba. The problem was, what was to be done with them?

The present King knew that Kilba without its alien population was efficient and quite capable of holding its own against Neka. Already the latter had a difficulty to provide sufficient food for themselves. To return the slaves to the native island would benefit the Kilbas more than it would the Nekas. So the prisoners were released.

Each man was thereupon branded on the right shoulder and told that his release was conditional to the effect that he must swear by his tribal gods never to take up arms against the Kilba Islanders. If he did and again fell into their hands death would be the penalty.

At a word from the King the body of the doubly treacherous Neka was carried away. The ranks reformed. The King made another short speech which was enthusiastically received.

Then, taking a garland of scarlet hibiscus flowers from an attendant, he placed it on Ken's shoulders with such gentleness that its weight did not affect the lad's injured collar-bone.

The act was the signal for a frantic scene. Every native raised his spear high in the air and shouted a chorus. Then, as one man, the warriors prostrated themselves until their turban-like hair touched the ground.

Three times this rite took place and the ranks resumed their rigid attitude.

"Do you know what this means?" asked the King.

Kilsyth shook his head. The bestowal of the garland might mean an appreciation of his successful effort to save the King from the assassin's spear.

"It means," continued the old man, "that the warriors of Kilba have accepted my successor—when the time comes. You, Kenneth Kilsyth, will be the next King of Kilba."

CHAPTER XV

THE RIVAL FLEETS

KENNETH KILSYTH was as slow to grasp the significance of the King's statement as he had been when—not so very long ago—he had been dumbfounded by the receipt of the thousand pounds cheque that had been responsible for his present position.

When the knowledge dawned upon him—for in this respect he was “slow in the uptake” however alert and active he was in other matters—he hardly knew what to think.

It was awfully jolly to be a sort of big pot with the prospect of becoming King of a real island, he decided; but on the other hand, in spite of the as yet unsampled delight of life on Kilba Island, there was not much fun in being cooped up with a crowd of natives—smart looking, healthy and intelligent though they were—for the rest of one's natural life. It wouldn't be at all a bad wheeze if Kilba were in communication with the outside world, but, judging by the present King's long experience, that possibility was a very remote one. But it was better by far to be king-presumptive of a Pacific Island than to be lying fathoms deep on the ocean bed or rotting on the

ground of this ill-omened place. One of Ken's maxims was "Never say die till you're dead."

"All right," he replied, "I'll do my level best, but where does my chum come in?"

The King puckered his brows. "Come in," was an expression new to him.

"I don't understand," he remarked.

"My chum Hayes," rejoined Ken. "What's his position on the island?"

"He'll have a position in due course," was the reply. "After he has earned it. Amongst my people personal courage is held in high esteem. When Hayes has shown that—not, of course, that they doubt that he has courage, only they haven't had a chance to see him display it."

"It looks as if there won't be lack of opportunity," declared Hayes. "Well, good luck to you, old son. You don't want me to tell you I'll back you up through thick and thin. I say; don't I wish I had a camera. You do look posh in that wreath or whatever it is."

"How much longer have I to wear this?" asked Ken, appealing to the King.

"Wait until I dismiss the men," was the reply. "Then we'll set off for the hill of sacrifice."

At the word of command the serried ranks saluted and dispersed. Kilsyth removed his emblem of royalty, which was taken away by one of his servants and placed in a canoe.

Selecting half a dozen armed men as a body-guard, the King accompanied by the two lads set

off towards the scene of the encounter with the stilt-walking warriors.

In spite of his age, the King walked quickly, even leaping over obstacles that lay in his path. In fact, Kenneth and Gerald, out of practice in walking after weeks of life afloat, had some difficulty in keeping pace with him.

The Kilba Islanders showed no hesitation at ascending the hill of sacrifice. The *tabu* of hereditary foes had no terrors for them.

The King of Kilba was taken to the spot where the Neka chief had fallen.

"That is not Tia-Na," he declared. "It is Kala, his half-brother. That is a pity. Tia-Na is a pig-headed man. It is impossible to come to terms with him. If we did he would not keep them. Now Kala was different. He was bold and courageous and he kept his word. You saw no other chief?"

"No," replied Ken. "He was the only one wearing a cloak of feathers. It was he who led the attack."

"In that case the sooner the sea moderates the better," rejoined the King. "It looks much easier to wind'ard, but there is still a tumultuous tumble just beyond the nearest reef."

Just then one of the natives approached, planted the tip of his spear in the ground and saluted with upraised right hand.

The King looked startled and gazed seawards. So did Ken and Gerald. They could discern nothing but a waste of water, white

where it broke on the isolated and outlying shoals.

"This man reports that a fleet of sailing canoes is approaching," announced the King. "Do you see anything? My eyesight is not so good as it was."

The chums had to admit that they could not. Their range of vision was not nearly so keen as that of the native, and unfortunately Ken had left his binoculars with the rest of his gear.

Calling another of his escort, the King asked him if he could see sails.

The man replied "Yes," adding that they were canoes from Neka Island.

"How do you know?" demanded the King.

"Because the sails are black and ours are brown," was the unruffled, confident reply.

"Back to the beach," ordered the King. "We must launch our canoes and meet them afloat—even if we have to do so in shoal water."

"It will be a sea fight, then?" asked Gerald.

"It will," answered the King, "and against long odds. I told you that Tia-Na was crafty. I expected he would make an attack upon Kilba in my absence. The Neka Islanders who escaped from you yesterday have told him either that you are here or else that I brought part of our fleet of war-canoes to the island. So either he intends to revenge himself on you or else to attempt to smash our rather small fleet and then attack Kilba at his leisure. He's counting on the chance that our canoes have suffered severely

during the hurricane. Well, we must let him know he's wrong."

Already the three white men were striding down the hill towards the place where the canoes had been hauled out. Two of the native attendants had been ordered to run on and warn the rest of the warriors of the impending danger.

By the time the King and the two chums reached the shore most of the canoes were afloat. Others, resting on rough rollers made of sections of palm trunks, were being man-handled down the slope towards the lagoon. Compared with the stupendous task of hauling them up the incline, this was a fairly easy operation.

In less than an hour the thirty-five war-canoes were afloat. No attempt was made to launch the smaller craft fitted with outriggers. These were for peaceful pursuits and utterly unfit to take their places in the fighting line. Accordingly a few of the older ones were ordered to remain behind with these frail craft and to proceed to load them up with the articles and gear salvaged from the *Mumtaz*. They were also told to post sentries up the hill, and should the impending fight go against the Kilba Islanders, the outriggers were to put to sea and proceed home by a circuitous route, avoiding if possible all contact with the enemy.

"Will you stop with these men?" asked the King addressing Ken and indicating the party told off to stand by with the outriggers. "With your injury you can well be excused."

Kilsyth declined. There was no hesitation about that. Hayes had not been given the option. It was taken for granted that he was to play his part in the forthcoming action. And Hayes wanted to, too. The King's previous reference to the fact that he had not been given an opportunity to display his courage before the Kilba Islanders still rankled. He quite admitted to himself that he might be in a funk at the prospect of being mixed up in a hand-to-hand fight between two parties of savages; but he was in a still greater panic at the thought that perhaps the Kilba warriors would see that he was afraid.

"Of course I'll go with you," declared Ken, replying to the King's offer. "My automatic will come in useful and fortunately both my arms aren't crocked."

The three embarked on the King's canoe, a vessel nearly eighty feet in length and ten at its greatest beam. The King took one of the double-barrelled shot-guns, Hayes had the other as well as the magazine rifle for long-range work.

It was a weird and inspiring sight that met Ken's gaze as he stood beside the King on the raised platform aft.

Immediately behind him stood the two huge natives whose task it was to steer the canoe by means of long, broad-bladed paddles. On either side of the poop were grouped warriors armed with spears and shields. The whole of the waist, with the exception of a narrow gang-plank run-

ning fore and aft, was occupied by muscular, naked paddlers, each wielding leaf-shaped bladed paddles of a richly carved design. Each man had either a spear or club close to hand, while his shield hung over the side much after the style of the old Norse galleys.

On the equivalent for a fo'c'sle were the bowmen and stone-throwers. The latter did not make use of slings but propelled their missiles by means of a short stick terminating in a cup-like receptacle. From close quarters both bowmen and stone-throwers depended upon clubs, spears and in a few cases upon formidable looking axes with tufts of bent grass projecting above and beyond the green-stone cutting part.

After consulting with some of the chiefs, the King turned to Ken.

"The sea's easing down outside," he remarked. "We may have a bit of a chop going out; but my men will fight better with plenty of sea-room. How do you feel at the thought of a battle?"

"I hardly know what to say," replied the lad. "It's my first experience of that sort of thing afloat."

In fact he could not describe his sensations. He felt excited, eager to see the thing through. It was the interval before the actual fight that tired him most. At the same time he fully realized the danger. There could be no backing out. It would be a case of "woe to the vanquished" with a vengeance.

At a sign from the King a horn was blown

shrilly from the forepart of the canoe. Simultaneously the paddles beat the hitherto tranquil water. The long and seemingly unwieldy craft forged ahead obedient to the efforts of the muscular paddlers.

In pairs the remaining canoes were set in motion, each pair following those immediately ahead at a distance of about their own length. This was the cruising formation. Once clear of the outer reef the flotilla would take up its battle position.

Ken glanced at Hayes out of the corner of his eye. He looked at him without his chum being aware of the fact; but the glance was enough.

"He'll do," thought Kilsyth, noticing the compressed lips and steady look on Gerald's face.

Soon, after a steady pace was maintained, the leading craft were pitching and rolling in the still agitated water beyond the lagoon. The paddles kept their monotonous, deliberate beat, the men reserving their energies until the hostile fleets came to grips.

"There they are, then," remarked Gerald, as, on rounding a spur of the now distant island, the first of a far-flung line of black sails came into view.

"Yes," rejoined the King. "They've got what used to be called the weather-gauge. They're running before the wind. We've got to paddle dead into the eye of it."

Instinctively Ken drew his automatic, although it would be at least a quarter of an hour before

the fleets closed. Somehow the touch of the weapon gave him increased confidence. Hayes had already charged the magazine for him, and in spite of his useless right arm, he could when the time came, release the safety catch and set the hammer with his left.

So far the Kilba men had kept silent. Again the horn sounded. The paddlers in the King's canoe rested from their labours until each of the other canoes had drawn into line with their supreme head's boat in the centre.

For the third time the horn gave out its compelling note. Scores of paddles flashed in the sunlight, and to the accompaniment of a hideous chorus of shouts the whole line advanced.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SEA FIGHT

THE Neka fleet had also taken up its battle formation—a crescent with the horns nearly a mile apart. The line was irregular; while, judging by the straggling manner in which the enemy lowered their sails and struck their masts, the Neka Islanders did not possess the efficiency and discipline of the King of Kilba's warriors.

Nevertheless by reason of their inferior numbers the Kilba canoes were in danger of being outflanked. Once those horns contracted they would be nipped as surely as a nut between a pair of crackers.

By the aid of the binoculars Ken had brought ashore from the *Mumtaz*, the King scanned the hostile line. Presently he gave a grunt of satisfaction, laid down the binoculars and picked up the 12-bore.

"Eight hundred yards," he announced laconically. "See what you can do with that rifle of yours, Hayes."

Gerald opened the cut-off, adjusted the sights and raised the rifle to his shoulder, taking aim at the centremost of the enemy canoes.

Ken picked up the binoculars even as the first crack rent the air.

“Over, I think,” he reported. “It made them duck, though.”

Hayes let fly with five shots in rapid succession. Some of them must have taken effect—probably ricochets—for there was considerable consternation not only on board the canoe he had made his target, but on those on either beam.

The horn sounded its battle note. With a blood-curdling yell the Kilba fleet pressed forward towards the hostile centre. The latter made no attempt to advance; but—and here the Neka Islanders showed their cunning—the horns were put in motion to deepen the crescent and envelop their antagonist by superior numbers.

At about four hundred yards the King of Kilba gave a signal. At once every canoe under his command turned at right angles to her former course, and headed straight for the enemy's left wing.

This manœuvre took the Nekas completely by surprise. Only a half-hearted volley of arrows and stones greeted the oncoming craft, and since the King's canoe was leading the bulk of the missiles was directed against her—and the arrows were poisoned!

Men were hit and crumpled across the hafts of their now useless paddles; but there was sufficient way left to carry the canoe on until her beak-like bows crashed into the side of the nearest hostile craft.

At the same moment the King let fly with both barrels into the canoe on the starboard side while Hayes emptied his 12-bore into the canoe to port.

From that moment Ken saw red. Although the shock of the impact sent him violently against a chief standing close to him, he recovered himself and levelled his automatic at a cluster of bedaubed warriors on a Neka canoe on the port-quarter.

He pressed the trigger. Pressed it again. Nothing happened. Then, and only then, he realized that he hadn't released the safety-catch.

A stone, whizzing past his ear, narrowly missed his injured shoulder. From the poop of a canoe less than ten yards away a fuzzy-haired Neka was about to hurl another missile at the white chief.

This time Ken fired, aiming at the native's broad chest. The man stood stock-still for perhaps a couple of seconds, his right arm upraised. Blood was welling from a small puncture in the centre of his forehead.

"This pistol throws high," thought Ken, as the native pitched on his face.

The canoe from which the man had hurled the stone was converging. A swarm of Nekas gathered for'ard ready to spring upon the King of Kilba's canoe. Somewhat recklessly Ken emptied his magazine into the crush, but the two craft continued to diminish the distance between them.

A stunning report close to Kilsyth's ear told him that the King had fired a double charge from

his 12-bore. The heavy charge, for the shot had not time to spread, had been aimed not at the crew but at the water-line of the hostile craft. It blew a hole in her side almost as large as a man's head. She commenced to fill.

Before the sinking craft could be urged alongside her foe her gunwale dipped. Her crew, still galled by arrows and stones, leapt overboard and struck out madly for the nearest Neka canoe.

While he was still fumbling in an effort to recharge the magazine of his automatic—and what with his excitement and the fact that he could only use his left arm, the task took a seemingly interminable time—Ken heard the King shout into Hayes' ear, telling him to aim at the enemy canoe's water-line.

In this way three of the Neka boats were accounted for in quick succession, but already the King's canoe was in a bad way. Most of the men in the waist were either dead or dying—for those wounded by arrows were almost as good as dead. At close range their shields formed little protection from these deadly missiles; yet unaccountably there were few casualties either amongst the warriors grouped for'ard or those standing around their King.

The while there was a most terrific din. Friend and foe were yelling their respective battle-cries. The thudding of stones, the crash of broken wood, the frequent reports of the fire-arms and the cries of the wounded added to the uproar; while, unlike a battle between civilized forces,

there was no smoke to throw merciful veil over the ghastly scene.

There could be no doubt that the few fire-arms the white men possessed were equal in effect to a dozen canoes. The moral result was great, for after the sinking of the first four craft the Nekas were chary of attacking the King's canoe.

But Ken realized that this was only a small part of a far-spread battle. How things were going elsewhere he had no means of telling, except that the fight was still raging all around. The Kilbas had smashed the enemy left wing, but whilst this was in progress the Neka centre and right had completed the enveloping movement.

Those canoes of the former which had survived were clustered in a compact mass, and as yet the encircling line of Nekas had not succeeded in penetrating the close formation.

Ken had just succeeded in re-charging his automatic when four large canoes bore down on the starboard side of the King's canoe. Coming bows on they were not easy to sink by gun-fire. The three white men directed their aim upon the crowd of warriors grouped in the bows of the leading boat. They simply withered away; but the second craft held on. Her crew, gaining experience by their comrades' misfortune, took the precaution to lie down.

She came on so swiftly, under the united efforts of fifty savages furiously plying the paddles, that her bows crashed into her opponent's side and almost to the opposite gunwale. The

impact was terrific. Almost every one, including the King, was thrown off his feet, as the doomed canoe rolled, her gunwale under.

Ken sat down inelegantly. Fortunately he saved his injured shoulder from further damage. Hayes pitched headlong over his legs, and "brought up" against the body of a slain chief.

Both lads staggered to their feet just in time to see a swarm of Nekas dropping over the bows of their craft in order to fall upon their shaken opponents.

They heard the King shout something in the Kilba tongue; saw him clutch his gun and fire it close range into the mob of Nekas. Then, led by the now strangely active old man, the surviving warriors followed the King upon the fore-deck of the canoe that had rammed her opponent.

Except for the dead and dying only the two chums remained on the poop of the foundering canoe.

"Come on!" shouted Hayes. "We'll have to jump for it! I'll give you a hand."

Clutching their fire-arms, the pair made their way along the steeply inclined centre gangway towards the spot where the bows of the Neka canoe were jammed hard into the gap she had created. As they did so, they realized their extreme peril.

Their craft was sinking under their feet, while the King and his meagre band of warriors were being beaten back from the deck of the Neka canoe.

CHAPTER XVII

AT KILBA

HAMPERED by his injured chum, Gerald Hayes realized that this was a tight corner if ever there was one. To remain where they were meant being left struggling in the water to be picked off at leisure by the bowmen and stone-throwers of the Neka canoes. To join the King and his meagre band was the only thing possible, even though he was being beaten back by superior numbers.

“Jump for it!” shouted Hayes. “I’ll stand by and give you a hand.”

Fortunately the Neka canoe had received damage to her bows when she rammed her opponent and the jagged woodwork afforded a foothold.

With his automatic thrust into his pocket, Ken contrived to draw himself up and gain the fore-deck. Hayes threw the rifle and shot-gun up and scrambled after his chum. They found themselves on a clear space in rear of the desperate men engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle.

Of what happened next Ken had but a hazy idea. He remembered standing up and emptying his automatic into the faces of the savages; hearing Hayes’ gun going off with a terrific report and

seeing quite a lane cut through the crowd of Nekas; saw, in a sort of mist, his chum drop the 12-bore, snatch up his rifle, and stand over the now prostrate body of the King of Kilba; saw a huge warrior grasp the muzzle of the rifle with one hand and raise a broad-bladed spear with the other.

Hayes pressed the trigger. The Neka fell with most of his head blown away. The man behind him dropped also as the high velocity bullet passed completely through the two of them.

Discarding his empty and temporarily useless automatic, Ken snatched up the 12-bore. It was unloaded. He remembered he had a few cartridges in his pocket, loaded and levelled the weapon.

Even as he pressed the trigger of the right barrel a spurt of flame leapt from the deck. The King, although prone, had contrived to let off both barrels. Ken emptied his second. Where a moment ago, there had been a crowd of maddened Nekas there was a blank space—but other savages were pressing forward to continue the fight.

The King recovered his feet. With him, in addition to Ken and Gerald, were five Kilba warriors.

Crouching behind their shields the Nekas advanced, crowding along the central gang-plank or leaping over the bodies that littered the waist. Even as they prepared for a furious rush, a canoe

surged up alongside and disgorged a swarm of Kilba warriors to the aid of their King.

The tables were turned. Within a few minutes not a single Neka remained alive in the captured canoe.

Yet there was little respite for the jaded survivors of the King's canoe's crew. Abandoning their prize, they boarded the rescuing craft which prepared to plunge again into the fray.

It was now that the King of Kilba saw his chance and took it. The canoe was now outside the wide circle of combatants. The fight was still raging strongly, although the Nekas had not seriously penetrated the compact knot of Kilba craft. The former were so intent upon the fight that they failed to notice a Kilba canoe outside their circular formation, and on that account it was out of the question for fire-arms to be used upon them for fear of the shots and bullets injuring the Kilba warriors.

But the two 12-bores could be put to another use.

Ordering the steersman to keep within fifteen yards of the outer circle of Neka boats the King told Hayes to fire at the water-line as before.

Both 12-bores were loaded and fired at close range and with deadly effect. Canoe after canoe was holed by the compact charge of buck-shot and in many cases they were on the point of sinking before their crews realized that they were doomed. At close range a charge of shot will shatter a stout branch of a tree, so the result

against the comparatively frail hull of a South Sea Island canoe will be readily imagined.

At length the surviving Neka canoes broke off the action and sought safety in flight. Under paddles and sail they fled, but the Kilba fleet was too badly damaged to take up the pursuit.

It was a victory dearly bought. Thirty-eight Kilba canoes alone remained afloat, some of them being so badly holed at the water-line that their crews had to crowd over to one side to give them sufficient list to bring the damaged parts clear of the surface.

The natives celebrated their success by vociferous shouts; but already the reaction was being felt by Ken and his chum. They seemed dazed at the prospect of finding themselves not only alive but practically unharmed by their ordeal. Ken's collar-bone seemed none the worse, but his coat was ripped in half a dozen places—a significant reminder of his narrow escape, since most of the rents had undoubtedly been caused by poisoned arrows. Gerald, with a rapidly rising bruise on his forehead (how it was received he had not the faintest idea) and a nasty contusion on his left hand, looked a regular scarecrow, for his trouser leg was completely torn away below the left knee, while both sleeves of his flannel shirt were ripped and covered with ochre—a souvenir of the hand-to-hand encounter on the Neka canoe.

But the King of Kilba was in a far worse state. His age was against him. During the fight his

agility surprised the chums, for even in the heat of the combat they could not help noticing the vigour with which he fought. Now he seemed to have shrunk. He looked his age and more; yet, visibly exhausted, he left undone nothing that might jeopardize the fruits of victory.

Five of the war-canoes were ordered to return to the island and escort the outriggers to Kilba. The remaining craft were directed to take up a double line ahead formation and resume their homeward voyage.

They were by no means undermanned. There were very few wounded men. Those hit by poisoned arrows had died very quickly and had been thrown overboard. Their places were more than filled by the hale survivors of the sunken canoes, who, being excellent swimmers, had made their way to the surviving craft and had clambered on board.

Skirting the triple-peaked island of Neka and making a bombastic display for the benefit of the beaten foe, the canoes soon raised Kilba Island above the horizon.

At first sight Ken took it to be two distant islands, but as the distance decreased he saw that Kilba consisted of a pair of lofty, well-wooded hills, with a deep valley between and a broad expanse of gently sloping ground running down to the sea. Viewed from the offing, the island appeared to be totally inaccessible, for wicked-looking reefs showed above the sea for quite five miles from land. Over these ledges the breakers

broke continuously, forming a seemingly unbroken barrier, sufficient to deter the stoutest-hearted skipper of any strange vessel that happened to sight the island.

Yet the canoes held on—rushing, as it seemed to Ken, to utter destruction. It seemed impossible for a lightly built craft to live in that tumultuous waste of water, but even the damaged canoes maintained their course with thirty men plying their paddles on one side and ten on the other, while the native helmsman had all his work cut out to counteract the unequal power by means of his broad-bladed steering paddle.

As the foremost boat approached the barrier reefs, Ken noticed that there was a gap, but the channel was barred by a jagged wall of half-tide rock against which the surf fell with a roar like thunder.

Straight for this dangerous reef the canoe steered until she was within a cable's length of it; then the paddles on the starboard side ceased their regular beats. The canoe swerved until she pointed more than at right-angles to her former course and dashed down a natural alleyway under the lee of the outer barrier.

Twisting and turning ever so many times—Kilsyth lost all count of them—the now single line of canoes threaded their way through the most intricate channel imaginable, until at last, when about half a mile from the shore, they entered a placid lagoon.

Right ahead lay the principal village—the

houses—for they were something more than huts—consisting of crushed coral walls thatched with palm leaves. A wall and a dry ditch enclosed the village on three sides, that to seaward being unprotected by artificial means. On the shore were nearly a hundred canoes hauled up above high-water mark and sheltered from the fierce rays of the sun either by large mats or by the coco-palms which grew in profusion.

The beach was black with people eager to welcome their ruler and the returning warriors; while swarms of natives, not content with waiting on dry land, were swimming to meet the battle-scarred canoes.

It was a whole-hearted and spontaneous welcome to their aged white ruler. Men, women and children gambolled, shouted, sung in the weird, crooning style of the Pacific Islanders; yet even in their enthusiasm they showed signs of curiosity at the sight of the King's white companions.

“What do you think of Kilba?” asked the King.

“It's a topping show,” declared Kenneth.

“Meaning? I don't know the term ‘topping’ except when it applies to a ship's spars and derricks.”

“That it's better than ever I expected,” explained the lad. “I thought it was going to be topping—I mean a jolly fine place, and this beats my expectations.”

“Good!” ejaculated the King. “Now we'll go ashore.”

By this time the canoe had run her forefoot on the beach. A dozen warriors plunging waist-deep into the water, formed a platform by interlocking the shafts of their spears and placing two oblong shields on them. Upon this movable stage the King sat, and was carried ashore in state. Other natives performed a similar office for Ken and Gerald, and the chums found themselves standing upon the soil of the island over which in due course Kilsyth would in all probability become the supreme head.

Somehow Ken did not feel at all dignified in his disreputable garb. Although the natives preserved a discreet distance they were curiously regarding the new arrivals. Already the warriors from the canoes had spread the news of the victory and had explained in their own way the deadly nature of the "heavy-wood-pipes-that-throw-fire-and-death," such being their description of the double-barrelled guns the chums carried. Curiously enough the natives attached very little importance to their far more deadly rifle, because its report when discharged was a mere whip-like crack compared with the crash of the 12-bores.

A procession was formed, headed by a number of musicians playing upon instruments that gave a lute-like tone. Following them came the drummers, banging lustily upon skins stretched tightly over the hemispherical shells, then the picked regiment of warriors corresponding to the Guards of civilized nations.

The King, reclining on his litter and surrounded by spearmen, came next, followed by Ken and Gerald, perched upon a swaying platform and surrounded by a clamorous throng of excited natives. Apparently the knowledge of the Kilba Islanders' losses in the fight hardly troubled them. To die fighting was accounted an honour and preferable to going out of the world by natural means. At any rate there were no demonstrations of grief shown by the dense pack escorting the three white men.

In the centre of the principal street, for the village was well-planned with wide thoroughfares laid out in the accepted American style, was a raised dais composed of a blue-grained stone resembling granite.

On this the King took his stand and signed to Ken and Gerald to take their places one on either side of him.

By merely raising his hand the old man obtained perfect silence. Then he harangued the crowd. The chums could not understand a single word, but it was evident that they were being referred to.

Suddenly the King broke off.

"Stand here, Kilsyth," he exclaimed, and Ken stepped to the edge of the dais.

The clamour was deafening. Spears flashed in the sunlight, palm branches were waved frantically and a shower of scarlet hibiscus flowers was thrown at the embarrassed youth.

"You've passed muster," declared the King.

"They've accepted you as their future king. Now, Hayes, you've earned your reputation as a fighting man. Stand forward, and let them welcome you. I've told them you're the brother of their future ruler. It's all bunkum and eye-wash, of course, but that's the sort of thing that will appeal to them."

More demonstrations of enthusiasm greeted Gerald's official introduction to the Kilba Islanders. Then the King made another short speech to which one of the chiefs replied, and the gathering dispersed to discuss the momentous happenings of that memorable day.

"Tractable lot, aren't they?" remarked the King, as he led the way to his palace—a rather presentable one-storeyed building on the high ground on the landward side of the town. "If you go to work the right way, you can do anything with them. Did you notice that stone platform we were standing on? It would be a low estimate if I told you that over ten thousand people have been sacrificed on it. It is the only original part of the town. When first I came here there was nothing but this stone of sacrifice and a couple of hundred reed and palm-thatched huts. My predecessors made them knock off killing and eating their prisoners. It was a pretty tough job to get them to do it, I understand. I got them to build decent huts."

"How many people are there on the island?" asked Kenneth.

"Nearly five thousand, at a rough guess,"

replied the King. "The population both of Kilba and Neka is decreasing. It's been a war of extermination extending over centuries; but even I can't get them to make a lasting peace. Tia-Na, the Neka chief, is the present stumbling-block. Not that a mutual peace would be beneficial. They'll drift into a lazy crowd. War keeps them up to pitch, so to speak. The only alternative is a complete conquest of Neka, and that seems as far off as ever."

"We gave the Neka crowd a thundering good hiding to-day," remarked Hayes.

"Yes, but they're like corks," rejoined the King. "It's their turn one day, ours the next. More than once the Kilba Islanders have landed and fought battles in Neka, but only once on record have the Nekas succeeded in obtaining a foothold here. Although we haven't so many war-canoes as they have we've the advantage of the reefs. When we see them coming our canoes meet them as they come through the channel we made use of just now. There's only one approach to Kilba. There are half a dozen to Neka."

A sumptuous meal, judged by the nature of the resources of the island, awaited the King and his guests on their arrival at his house. The repast was served in a long, lofty and airy room. There was no table, but the chums were invited to sit on low stools, the food being handed to them on rush plattens by native servants. In his house the King gave all his orders to his staff in English. They understood readily enough and could reply

intelligently, although they could not break the habit of adding a vowel to almost every word.

In spite of the absence of knives and forks, the chums enjoyed their meal. For one thing they were hungry and the food smelt and tasted appetizing. There was roast pork, fowl freshly baked in clay, yams, taros and fruits resembling oranges and plums, though differing in flavour.

"Do you know," remarked the King during the course of the repast, "that if I were able to leave the island and return to England, I would be rich enough to be independent for the rest of my life—which won't be much longer. And if you find a chance to get away the same condition applies to you. What do you think the wealth consists of?"

"Gold?" suggested Hayes.

"Not a grain of it on the island," replied the King. "There are no metals."

Gerald shook his head.

"I can't guess," he declared.

"To-morrow, then," said the King, "I'll send a chief with you to take you round the island. There'll be wealth lying at your feet, but I'm ready to stake everything on it that you won't notice it."

"What is it, then?" asked Ken.

The old man smiled.

"Wait till you've made a round trip of the island," he replied.

CHAPTER XVIII

KEN SITS IN JUDGMENT

AT dawn on the following day the outrigger canoes and their escort arrived. Their crews reported that the Nekas had made no attempt to intercept them, so it was evident that the enemy's *morale* had received a very nasty jolt.

There was no time lost in unloading the gear removed from the *Mumtaz*. The chums' personal belongings were intact, two of their servants having remained behind to handle them. Nothing would have induced the other natives to lay even a finger on the baggage, thanks to the fear of its being *tabued*.

"That's one native custom that may well be preserved," remarked Ken, as the chums proceeded to discard their battle-torn clothes and rig themselves out in clean gear. "What will happen when we've worn this lot out? Nature rig, I suppose."

Somehow the idea of going about with nothing except their birthday suits and loin-clothes did not appeal to them, although the King seemed to enjoy this form of primitive apparel. In fact when Hayes offered him a white drill jacket, the

old man promptly declined the gift with the remark that it tickled his back ! Except on state occasions the King wore no head covering of any sort, yet he seemed impervious to sunstroke although the top of his head was bald. As for the natives, their frizzy, turban-like hair formed a decided protection against the sun's rays, for, with the exception of their white King, there was not a bald-headed person on the island.

"And we'll have to be jolly careful of our ammunition," continued Kilsyth. "Three unopened fifties and seven loose cartridges, that's 150 for the 12-bores. There are about two hundred ball cartridges for the .303 and I'm on the last packet of automatic ammunition."

"We haven't wasted any," remarked Hayes.

"How about when we blazed away at bottles in the old *Mumtaz* ?"

"H'm, perhaps, yes ; yet we had to have practice, hadn't we ?"

"Well, thank goodness we won't have to drink out of a calabash and use our fingers to eat with," declared Ken as one of the native servants unfastened a piece of canvas and revealed a jumble of crockery, knives, forks and spoons, late the property of the steamship company to which the ill-fated S.S. *Mumtaz* once belonged.

At that moment the still morning air was rent by the blaring notes of "The Harmonious Blacksmith." The King of Kilba had unpacked the gramophone and was getting busy. In fact he kept the instrument going almost continuously

throughout the day, and when he got tired of winding it up he ordered one of his men to keep the music going, while he listened with the eagerness of a child for the wheezy outpouring of the box of potted torture.

"He'll soon get fed up with that," declared Ken.

"He'll use up all the needles first," rejoined his chum.

"He's done that already judging by the records," said Kilsyth.

That was just before breakfast. The meal over the King dispatched the two chums on their tour of the island, and returned to the as yet unalloyed joys of the gramophone.

The chief who acted as guide was a stalwart man, standing nearly six feet six inches without taking into consideration the eight or nine inches of turbaned hair to add to his stature. He carried a light spear to the haft of which was tied a bunch of scarlet feathers. This was the distinctive mark of one of the tribal headmen. He could speak English after a fashion and could understand readily enough when spoken to, which was easily accounted for by the fact that he had spent most of the first twenty years of his life in the King's personal service.

Literally arrayed in purple and fine linen, for they wore white tropical suits and lavender ties, the chums set out. Ken had his automatic in his hip pocket, otherwise both lads were unarmed.

The route lay up-hill between thick groves

of coco-palms, through which wild pigs roamed in hundreds. There were numerous varieties of birds, too—a striking contrast to the ill-omened island on which the *Mumtaz* had been cast—but they were absolutely songless. Lizards abounded, but since their guide, who answered to the name of Toto, hardly troubled to avoid them, the chums concluded that they were harmless.

“Are there snakes?” asked Hayes.

Toto shook his head.

“Me no specka snakes,” he replied.

Taking out his notebook and pencil, Gerald drew a picture of a snake, fangs being prominently shown. Then he gave a hiss to emphasize the nature of the reptile.

“Good!” ejaculated the chief. “Me finda snakes.”

“Don’t,” protested Hayes, but Toto was not to be turned aside from his purpose.

He went into the scrub and returned with a piece of flexible reed about six feet in length, each end being plugged with a large thorn.

“What’s he going to do?” asked Hayes.

“Goodness knows,” replied his chum. “You asked for it. Perhaps it’s a trap to catch a snake.”

Toto then collected a small heap of dried leaves and sticks. This he set alight, producing fire in less than a minute by merely rubbing two pieces of wood together. Then he coiled the reed into a spiral and held it over the flames. Presently the

moisture in the reed began to emit a hissing sound. Toto placed the coils on the ground.

"Snakes!" he ejaculated proudly.

"For goodness' sake, don't laugh at him," said Ken warningly. "It's certain he's never seen a snake, but he's gone to all this trouble to try to gratify your wish."

"*Ki!*" exclaimed Hayes, using the Kilba word for "Thank you."

Still ascending the gently rising ground at the entrance to the deep valley the chums came upon a small village. Like the principal town it was defended by a ditch and a palisade of sharpened bamboos projecting outwards from the top of a wall.

The inhabitants had attended the ceremony when their King had introduced the chums, and now they welcomed Kilsyth and Hayes in loyal fashion, the warriors giving the salute due to their future sovereign and his "brother."

Then, to the consternation of the chums, the natives produced gifts—live pigs, fowls, coconuts, taro-roots and plantains—enough to feed fifty men for a week.

"What are we to do, Toto?" asked Ken.

"No take, giba backa," replied their guide, philosopher and friend. "Me speaka."

He delivered a short speech, expressing the delight of the royal personages for the gift and their desire that the inhabitants should feast at their expense—which was exactly what the natives hoped would happen. They would have

been nicely "had" if their gifts had been accepted, the offering being merely the customary formal expression of loyalty.

Before the shouts of approbation had died away, the headman of the village brought two youths before Kenneth and his companion. The young natives, both of whom were armed with spears and shields, grovelled in the dust, and on regaining their feet scowled murderously at each other.

The headman spoke and Toto translated.

The youths were the sons of a man who had been killed in the canoe action with the Nekas. According to the custom of Kilba the father's property was to be equally divided, and it was on the question of a fair division that the sons disagreed.

Toto explained that they wanted to fight. It would be a spectacle for the King's "sons," he added, and also it would amuse the people. The victor would then take all the property.

"There must be no fighting," decided Ken. "If you fight amongst yourselves, who will be left to fight the Nekas? I will see that the property is fairly divided. Are you agreed?"

The brothers assented. After all it was an honour to have one's affairs attended to by the King's heir.

The headman led the way to the fallen warrior's hut. Almost every man, woman and child in the village formed the tail of the procession.

When Ken arrived at the place, he was not

quite so sure of the simplicity of his task. There was a hut, which, unlike those in the principal village, was constructed of bamboo interwoven with reeds. All the rude furniture and cooking utensils were brought out and a number of pigs, fowls and goats driven into a pen in front of the building.

"How much land belongs to these men?" asked the youthful judge.

It was pointed out to him; a rectangular plot about two hundred feet in length and fifty in breadth. The hut stood in one corner of the ground.

It was an easy matter to divide the ground, but it was the hut that formed a knotty problem.

"Tell them to cut the house in half and place one half on each plot," ordered Ken.

This task was completed in about five minutes, the bamboo uprights being removed bodily by the efforts of a score of energetic men.

"Now," continued Ken, beginning to feel sure of himself, "tell the elder son to divide the property into two portions."

This the elder son did, taking good care to select the fattest of the live-stock and the best of the domestic goods. The other litigant looked very glum, and only the presence of the King's "sons" prevented him from attacking his grasping relative.

"Ask the man if he is sure that he has made a fair division," ordered Ken.

Toto put the question. The divider of the property declared that he had.

“And are you quite satisfied?”

“Assuredly, noble lord,” replied the native, through the medium of the interpreter.

“It is well,” rejoined Kenneth, hardly able to conceal his mirth at the success of his plan.

“Since it is an equal division and you are satisfied, then let your brother choose his share!”

The young native promptly intimated that his choice fell upon the lot his brother had fondly hoped he had set aside for his own use. He was satisfied, the grasping brother could not protest without the risk of incurring the anger of the judge; while the rest of the inhabitants applauded lustily, and unmercifully jeered at the discomfited victim and his own selfishness.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TREASURE

AN hour's brisk walk from the village brought the chums to the commencement of the deep valley. Here the scenery was magnificent, the walls of rugged rock contrasting vividly with the verdant greens of the tropical foliage.

On one side of the mountain on the left of the pass were long narrow terraces, each having a number of well-built huts and bearing signs of active cultivation. Agriculture seemed to be the only peace-time occupation of the inhabitants of Kilba Island, for the fishing carried on was of a negligible character. In vain Ken looked for evidences of the existence of mines, thinking perhaps that therein lay the secret of the subject the King had hinted at—wealth.

He was disappointed—not because the precious object, whatever it might be, had eluded him, but because he prided himself upon his powers of observation, and it was galling to have to return and admit to the King that he had failed. Riches, in the present circumstances, were useless. A thousand pounds could not purchase a loaf or even a newspaper at Kilba.

At length they reached the summit of the pass.

Beyond they could see the ocean, with nothing to break the expanse of deep blue water except the shoals and reefs that on this side extended perhaps three miles from shore.

Two more miles brought them to the beach. Here the coast formed a shallow bay with slippery black rocks in place of the coral that was evident everywhere else.

About half a mile from the beach and in the sheltered waters of the lagoon a large whale was floating belly uppermost. It was obviously dead, for the huge tail was motionless, but the water all around was lashed into foam. The dead mammal was being attacked by a swarm of sharks.

"Perhaps the King meant whalebone," suggested Hayes.

"If he did, he's mistaken," replied Ken. "Whalebone in his young days was worth something. Flexible steel has made a better substitute, and the price of whalebone has fallen tremendously. But how about pearls?"

"Possibly that's what he meant," admitted Gerald. "Though I don't envy the man who has to dive for them. The place is stiff with sharks, and there'll be trouble——"

"There will be if you don't look where your'e treading," interrupted Kilsyth, grasping his chum's arm.

Hayes stopped abruptly, just in time to prevent his feet sinking in what looked to be a decaying mass of blackish fat that had been left on the shore by the receding tide.

"Pretty sight I'd look if I'd gone up to my knees in that stuff!" he exclaimed. "Thanks for pulling me up in time, old son. What did you bring us to this beastly place for, Toto?"

The chief merely smiled and pointed ahead.

As far as the next promontory there were more patches of the repulsive-looking stuff, but both Ken and Gerald took care to keep their eyes open and avoid them. The whole shore seemed a receptacle for ocean flotsam. Bones of cuttlefish, chunks of flesh from dead whales, putrid fish and masses of detached kelp all combined to taint the air with a putrid odour.

The chums were glad when they left the bay behind them.

At a charming waterside village a mile or so beyond they were hospitably entertained. Here they rested during the extreme heat of the day, and having witnessed a decidedly barbaric war-dance, they resumed their way.

It was late in the afternoon when they came in sight of the "capital" of Kilba. The wheezy strains of the gramophone greeted them from afar. The King was not yet tired of his new toy.

Outside the King's house a number of natives were engaged in sorting the metal from the wreck of the *Mumtaz*. They had never seen copper or brass before, nor metal of any description except a few much-worn knives which had been brought to the island many years ago by previous white men who in turn had become

sovereigns of the Kilbas. When they discovered that the salt-stained and verdigris-covered metal could be made to shine, their delight knew no bounds.

As the chums entered the room in which the King sat watching the energetic gramophone attendant wind up the instrument for the fiftieth time he signed to the native to go out.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you think of Kilba now?"

"More than I did yesterday," replied Ken.

"And the wealth of which I spoke?"

The lad shook his head.

"Perhaps there are pearls in the lagoon?" he hazarded.

"If there are," rejoined the King dryly, "I haven't seen them. Did Toto take you to the Bay of Dead Bones?"

"I should think he did," answered Ken feelingly. "Bones and slime; the place is stiff with them. Gerald nearly went up to his knees in some filthy stuff."

"Did he? And what was the stuff like?" asked the old man, his eyes twinkling under his beetling brows.

Kilsyth described it in no complimentary terms.

"Well," continued the King, "if you could take that stuff back to England, it would be worth at a modest estimate at least a couple of hundred thousand pounds!"

"What!" ejaculated both lads in amazement.

"It's the truth," declared the old man earnestly. "That stuff is ambergris. Nowhere is it found in large quantities except at Kilba. Why, I don't know, but there it is. A cargo of that would be worth a king's ransom."

"Why didn't you load up a fleet of canoes with it and make for a civilized port?" asked Hayes.

"For two reasons," was the reply. "One, that these canoes wouldn't stand the faintest chance of an 800-mile voyage in open water. Another, that my subjects won't let me leave the island, except when our war-canoes make expeditions to Neka, and the smaller islands of this group. Superstition is their strong point. They believe in the prophecy that Kilba will retain its independence so long as a white king reigns, and that final victory will come only when, as I told you before, a fiery chariot descends from the clouds. When you told me of those air—airo——"

"Aeroplanes," prompted Ken.

"Ah, that's the word. When you did I doubted your story. I still do parts of it. But there's one thing you can be sure about. The natives will never let you or me leave the island, so it's just as well to make the best of it. As far as I am concerned, I'm quite content to remain King of Kilba."

CHAPTER XX

THE INVADERS

A MONTH later Richard Walsh, King of Kilba, was found dead in his bed and Kenneth Kilsyth reigned in his stead.

It was a difficult task and Ken realized it. Although the late King had talked to him a lot concerning the manners and customs of his subjects, the lad's knowledge of the matter was far from being complete.

Yet he set about his hard task with enthusiasm, and Hayes backed him up right loyally. He made mistakes—chiefly on account of his endeavours to introduce civilized customs to his subjects.

"Let's teach them footer," suggested Ken. "We'll make it a national game. They want something to keep them actively amused."

"Right-o," agreed Gerald, and the game of football was introduced forthwith.

It was a dead failure from the start, although the Kilba Islanders took to it enthusiastically. They could not understand team-work. Each player played solely for his personal gratification and in order to display his prowess to the on-lookers. The result was a series of free fights,

and by the time four matches had been literally fought much blood had been shed and a still greater quantity of bad blood followed.

Ken had to put a *tabu* on football.

Next the chums introduced the noble game of cricket to Kilba Island. At first the players could not be made to realize that the ball was intended to knock down stumps and not to be used as a missile against the batsmen. That slight misunderstanding removed, the natives quickly developed into really good players.

Teams sprung up all over the island. Ken was beginning to congratulate himself when the fly manifested itself in the ointment. Within a few weeks cricket became such an acute epidemic that everything else was neglected. The crops remained uncut, the fishermen no longer went about their tasks. Even the women abandoned their household tasks either to watch the morning-till-noon matches or to take up cricket on their own account.

The attendants on the King neglected their duties to hunt the leather. The chums found it difficult to get them to prepare meals; but the climax came when Hayes happened to bring his binoculars to bear upon the highest mountain-peak.

There, from time immemorial, warriors had been posted to act as sentries and watch for any sign of activity on the part of the Nekas. These sentries did a "moon's" duty at a stretch—namely, for a lunar month—at the expiration of

which they were relieved by another detachment.

When Gerald looked he discovered that every warrior comprising the look-out post was playing cricket. They had used their spears for wickets, actually snapping off the hafts to make the stumps the correct length.

Ken *tabued* cricket.

It was easier said than done. Notwithstanding their usual implicit obedience to their King's orders the game had become a vice. Never before in the long, unwritten history of Kilba—for records had been handed down from mouth to mouth for centuries—had the natives dared to defy the hitherto inviolable *tabu*. Not that it was their nature to be insubordinate; it was simply an irresistible craze to indulge in the new game.

"We've done it this time!" declared Ken dejectedly. "The whole crowd of them is going to pot."

"Yes," agreed Hayes, "but you'll have to do something."

"What?" was his chum's natural inquiry. "We can't set about shooting the captains of the teams. The natives are in a very nasty mood."

The chums, sitting out under the veranda, were discussing the situation. It was a hot, calm night, the moon being almost at its full. Perfect silence reigned everywhere, except for the low, earnest voices of Ken and his companion. The natives, dead-tired after hours of exhausting cricket played in the rays of a blazing sun, had

retired to rest. Even the almost continuous roar of the surf was lulled.

It was an hour past midnight according to Ken's watch—the sole survivor of four possessed by the chums when the *Mumtaz* struck. Two had been hopelessly damaged when the typhoon swept over the island on the eve of the sea-fight; the third had “gone west” during the struggle. Even then it had rendered good service, for the wristlet watch had turned aside a blow with an ironwood sword which otherwise would have severed Hayes' wrist.

Suddenly the stillness of the night was disturbed by a babel of hideous shrieks and frantic shouts. The noise came from a long distance, yet owing to the still air the sound travelled clearly.

Both lads sprang to their feet and gazed towards the place whence the noise came. Even as they listened ruddy flames shot up to an immense height, like vertical pillars of light.

“Bad fire that,” commented Hayes. “Some careless blighter——”

“It's not an accident, it's by design,” interrupted Ken. “Rout out our lazy crowd and make them raise the alarm. The Nekas are getting busy.”

By dint of violent persuasive measures the chums succeeded in awakening the natives quartered in the palace, all of whom had a knowledge of English more or less.

“The Nekas have landed,” announced Ken. “Sound the drums and get the warriors together.”

The sleep-bemuddled natives took some moments to grasp the situation. At first, they were inclined to doubt the alarm, thinking that it was a ruse on the part of their young King; but when they heard the steadily increasing chorus of yells and shouts and saw the flames shooting skywards, they hurried to the square where the great war-drums, or "tom-toms," were permanently kept.

These instruments consisted of sections of soft wood trees hollowed out with stone implements. They were *tabu* except in times of communal danger—and this was one of them.

It was the first time the chums had heard the warning notes—a succession of weird *zum-zums* as the now alarmed men beat the drums with heavy sticks. The volume of sound was surprising. The heaviest sleeper in the town could not fail to be aroused by it. Even outlying villages, three or four miles away, heard the tocsin of danger and perhaps doom.

Men, women and children rushed from their dwellings in a state closely bordering on panic. In previous cases a similar summons would have brought the warriors, each with his ready weapons, to the open space in the centre of the town; where, falling-in in their customary places under the orders of their respective divisional chiefs, they would be available for defence at whatever part of the island the danger existed.

But now even a comparatively brief period of relaxation from discipline had produced dire

results. A few men brought their spears and shields. Most of the warriors had mislaid their hitherto prided weapons. Many of their bows lacked strings. The arrow-makers, men usually employed upon no other task, had sadly neglected their work, and in consequence the supply of missiles had not been maintained. In short, owing to their insatiable craze for cricket, the Kilba Island defence had deteriorated into a mob.

Everything was still in a state of confusion when refugees from the outlying sea-coast villages came pouring in through the unguarded gates and even in their terror leaping the ditch and scaling the undefended walls.

Although their reports were wildly incoherent, it was possible for the chums to discover some news of what had taken place.

In the brilliant light of a full moon a large fleet of Neka war-canoes had made their way through the reefs and across the lagoon without being seen or heard by anyone. The sentinels on the summit of the hill, exhausted by their strenuous pastime, had fallen asleep.

The first intimation of the invasion was the fierce battle-cry of the massed warriors of Neka as they hurled themselves upon the little village. Men, women and children were massacred, and the buildings given to the flames. Had the invaders landed outside the principal town, their success would have been equally easy; yet, knowing that the place was well fortified and defended in times past they devoted their atten-

tion to destroying the village and burning the crops on its outskirts.

The Nekas heard the Kilba war-drums and, their work of massacre and pillage completed, prepared to re-embark. But, contrary to their expectation, no serried masses of warriors appeared to dispute with them. Beyond the smoke of the burning village a clear view in the bright moonlight could be obtained almost to the earthworks and palisade surrounding Kilba town. Nor did the Kilba war-canoes put off from the beach in an attempt to harry the rear of the Neka fleet as it made for the gap in the reefs.

"*Wai!*" exclaimed the chief Tia-Na. "The hearts of the Kilbas are turned to water. Let us wait. There are more villages to burn and more dogs of Kilbas to eat up. And since their war-canoes do not come to us, let us go to them."

Fortunately for the inhabitants of the threatened villages they had already taken alarm and were fleeing hot-foot for Kilba town; but the Nekas descended upon the abandoned dwellings like a swarm of locusts, sacking the place and giving it over to the flames.

Meanwhile Ken and Gerald, carrying their fire-arms, were endeavouring with a fair measure of success to reduce chaos into some resemblance of order. About a hundred warriors armed with spears, clubs and shields, were collected under their chiefs, and sent to man the north wall where the attack might be expected to develop.

Then, having issued further instructions to the remaining chiefs, Ken, accompanied by his chum, went to the post of danger on the principal landward gate of the town.

Here they waited, unable to take the offensive through lack of men and cohesion between the respective chiefs. Had the Nekas pressed home an assault they would have swamped their enemies with ease.

By twos and threes, more warriors hurried to the defences—most of them bowmen who had contrived to collect a supply of arrows. The women were plucking up courage and heaping insults and taunts upon their dilatory husbands and brothers, while, assisting in a practical way, they collected buckets of stones and lighted fires to enable the defenders to hurl hot stones and blazing faggots upon the attackers.

The while panic-stricken refugees came flocking into the town. Most of the men were unarmed, and in the absence of weapons were more of a menace than an aid to the defence of the place.

Without the flames were spreading far and wide. There had been a prolonged spell of dry weather, and the crops, coco-palms and scrub burnt like tinder. In less than a couple of hours from the commencement of the invasion the island was divided by a wide track of flames that extended east and west from shore to shore and threatened to spread to the northern part of Kilba.

At last the stream of fugitives dwindled and ceased. The gates were closed and barricaded. With the exception of those who had fallen victims to the iron-wood spears and bone-tipped arrows of the Nekas, the Kilbas had either found perhaps a temporary sanctuary in the town or else had fled to the mountains. The enemy was in undisputed possession of roughly two-thirds of the island. Never before had they achieved such a success, and at so trifling a cost.

"Can't we go for the blighters instead of hanging on here?" asked Hayes, mindful of the dash with which the Kilbas had hurled their numerically inferior canoes against the self-same foe. "They seem to be scattered all over the place."

Calling two of the chiefs to him, Ken put the proposition before them. It was hopeless. The chiefs could not answer for their men and they themselves indicated pretty plainly that they preferred to remain on the defensive.

"Very well, then," declared Ken witheringly. "If you are afraid, my brother and I will go alone."

He meant it in all seriousness. Better by far, he decided, to take the initiative. The weapons of the white men were a source of fear to the Nekas, and no doubt there would be a number of Kilba warriors inspired by the King's example to follow him.

"Unbar the gate!" ordered Ken.

Some of the warriors surged around their youthful King and the two chiefs. They put

eager questions to the latter, and although Kilsyth had acquired a useful knowledge of the Kilba tongue the conversation was too rapid for him to follow.

“Unbar the gate!” repeated the lad sternly.

One of the chiefs placed his hand on Ken’s shoulder—an act that the latter’s predecessors would never have tolerated.

“We will not let you go,” he said.

Here was actual insubordination. Kilsyth realized that if the chief had his way the power of the white men was a thing of the past.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Ken let drive with his left. The chief, in spite of his greater height and bulk, dropped like a log.

“Come on!” shouted the lad, drawing his automatic and striding for the gate with Hayes at his side. He felt so exasperated at the truculent behaviour of his subjects that he hardly troubled to care whether any followed him or not; but the warriors plucked up courage and about fifty of them followed their King.

It was a desperate plan, but like most operations boldly undertaken against savages, its success depended upon initiative and the possession of fire-arms.

Men sprang forward to remove the stout tree-trunks barricading the gate. Even as they did so a terrific tumult arose on the waterside of the town.

Ken was too late. Already the advanced parties of the Nekas were assaulting the water-

front of the town where the walls terminated within ten yards of low-tide mark. Other bands of Neka were setting fire to the Kilba war-canoes which, drawn far up the beach and in many instances lying in the coco-groves, yielded easily to the devouring element.

Realizing what would happen once the Nekas gained an entry, the Kilbas manning that section of the defences put up a stiff resistance, but in their case it was every man for himself. Instead of the concentrated movement usually employed by the disciplined Kilbas when the spearmen advanced shoulder to shoulder with their large rectangular shields interlocked and supported by archers and stone-throwers, the defenders crowded forward without any system. The fight developed into a wild *mêlée*, friend and foe mingled in hopeless confusion.

The chums, abandoning their projected attack, ran to the scene of conflict. A couple of hundred or more Kilbas went with them. It was impossible to get them to remain and guard the wall. Had the Nekas delivered a simultaneous assault at any other point, they would have met with no opposition.

In the bright moonlight there was no mistaking friend from foe—the tattooed Kilba and the ochred Neka; but the chums quickly realized that it was out of the question to use fire-arms. The combatants were so jumbled that a bullet would bring down antagonists on both sides with the utmost impartiality.

The arrival of reinforcements, comprising the best of Kilba's deteriorated fighting men, checked the Neka advance, but the *mêlée* continued, men rolling over each other as they grappled in the dust.

"They're holding their own!" shouted Ken in his chum's ear. "Come with me to the wall. It's reinforcements that will be the danger."

Unnoticed in the struggle, for knowing that they could do little in a hand-to-hand struggle with such huge and powerful antagonists, the chums scaled the wall. They were not a moment too soon, for hurrying across to open ground were between two and three hundred Neka warriors. At this critical stage they would turn the scale once they gained a footing within the defences.

Both lads opened fire—Ken with his automatic, and Hayes with his rifle at a range of about a hundred and fifty yards. Men dropped. Others leaping over their bodies, continued their headlong rush, until at slightly over the recognized effective range for a shot-gun four barrels of No. 6 shot were emptied "into the brown."

The foremost of the Neka reinforcements crumpled up. Stung by the widely-diffused hail of shots the warriors collapsed in heaps, mainly through sheer fright. A few blinded by the pellets, ran hither and thither, slashing in their agony with their broad-bladed spears at those nearest them.

Again and again the lads fired. The Nekas

were on the run and they meant to keep them running. So intent were Ken and Gerald on this phase of the operations that they had not the faintest idea how things were going between the Kilba warriors and those of Neka who had forced their way through the gap.

The latter were giving way, the while resisting stubbornly. A dozen or more of them breaking away and finding their retreat cut off dashed straight for the two lads as they stood out clearly in the moonlight on the top of the wall.

In the act of reloading his 12-bore, Hayes glanced over his shoulder and caught sight of the swarm of ochred warriors. The foremost were already scaling the reverse slope of the embankment.

"Look out!" shouted Gerald warningly, and dropping his gun he picked up Ken's automatic.

Ken swung round on his heels and with feet planted firmly prepared to check the rush. His 12-bore was loaded. The nearest Neka was within arm's-length of the muzzle, when Kilsyth loosed the charge into the warrior's brawny chest. Before he could aim at the next antagonist a club descended upon his unprotected head.

Kilsyth, losing all interest in things, dropped limply upon the top of the wall he had so well defended. Hayes, standing over his chum's prostrate body, fired the automatic at Ken's attacker. The bullet, although it penetrated the Neka's body, failed to stop the impetus of the rush.

Hayes, caught by this human thunderbolt, was hurled backwards. His feet tripped against Ken's senseless body. He fell. As he did so Kilsyth, dislodged from his precarious position, slid inertly down the sloping face of the wall into the dry ditch.

The next instant the now active and ferocious Kilba warriors, whose courage had returned when by force of arms they had driven back their assailants, were pressing upon the desperate Nekas on the wall.

Most of the latter died fighting, but one of them, seizing Hayes by the waist, slung the dazed lad over his shoulder as easily as if it had been a bundle of straw. Covered by three of his fellows the warrior ran, and plunging through the eddy smoke from the burning war-canoes, disappeared with his captive.

CHAPTER XXI

DIRE DISASTER

KEN opened his eyes and gazed blankly at the moon. He was dimly aware that his head was throbbing. Why should it? He rarely had a headache. His first thoughts were of the nature of a hallucination. He was under the impression that he was back in the counting-house of Messrs. Grabaul and Gett—and he resented it.

“No, I’m not there, thank goodness,” he muttered. “I’m in the open air. I must have been laid out at soccer. Now, where was I playing, and whom against?”

Then it occurred to him that football is not usually played at night even in the brilliant light of the moon—and the moon did not shine like that at home. And it wasn’t the club trainer who was standing by. It was a native—a tattooed warrior. Two more, chiefs by their distinctive feather cloaks, were talking a short way off, while further away Ken could see the backs of a line of natives manning the earth-works. The air reeked of burning wood.

Part of the knowledge of the true state of things came back to him. He recollected the

surprise landing of the invaders, the mad rush of the fugitives to Kilba town, his thwarted attempt to have the gate opened and his attack delivered upon the enemy. And then the advance of the Neka reserves. Hayes and he were holding the wall. The attack had been beaten back, but what then?

Thoughts grew hazy again. Where was his chum? Where else could he be but at his post, encouraging the Kilba warriors to hold the defences against another attack? Of course it was absurd to expect Gerald to be with him. Gerald was all right.

But was he? Ken closed his eyes and tried to reconstruct the latter part of his doings before that unaccountable state of unconsciousness overcame him. Yes, he remembered Hayes' warning shout, and having brought down a Neka warrior—the foremost of a crowd attacking from behind.

He tried to rise, but fell back through sheer exhaustion. His face felt sticky. He put his hands to his head and found that the stickiness was caused by his own blood. His head had been bandaged. He could smell the peculiar odour of the balm which the Kilba Islanders use with such success that serious wounds which in ordinary circumstances would take a patient a fortnight to recover from were frequently healed in twenty-four hours.

It was only by sheer good fortune that Ken had not been brained by the Neka's club. The warrior in his frenzy had not dealt a direct blow

but had used the heavy iron-wood "waddy" as a missile. The head of the club had missed the lad's skull by an inch. It was the handle that had deprived him of his senses, the serrated end having ploughed a shallow furrow across the top of Ken's head.

With an effort, Kilsyth raised himself on one elbow and beckoned to the two chiefs—both of whom were members of the King's personal retinue.

"What are the Nekas doing?" he asked.

"They sit for come again, O King!" replied one of the chiefs with a deference that had been decidedly absent during the month or so preceding the invasion.

Ken knew what that meant. The enemy had been repulsed but they were not beaten. They were resting before launching another assault.

"And where is my brother Haya?" inquired the lad—"Haya" being the nearest the natives could get towards pronouncing Hayes' name.

"He go," replied the chief after some slight hesitation.

"Go where?" demanded Kilsyth sharply as a frightful suspicion swept across his mind.

With a supreme effort the lad's mind overcame his physical weakness. He tottered as he walked. The chiefs, now mindful of the exalted position of their young King, dared not assist him.

He came to the scene of the hand-to-hand encounter in the space between the termination

of the wall and the beach. Here the dead lay in great numbers, friend and foe. No one paid attention to them. The now alert Kilbas, realizing that the initial mistake might yet be atoned for, were busily engaged upon throwing up a barricade and digging a ditch to close the vital gap.

The situation was still desperate. Only about four hundred warriors remained in Kilba town. How many had taken refuge in the mountains there were no means of finding out. Of the rest, all had fallen either in the massacre or in defence of the town.

Against these four hundred were ten times their number of Nekas, flushed with victory, notwithstanding their initial failure to rush the defences.

Staggering like a drunken man, Ken scrambled up the sloping walls at the spot where he and Gerald had fought side by side. Four dead bodies lay on the outer ditch—three Nekas and a Kilba. There was also Hayes' 12-bore with its stock broken, but no signs of its owner.

Looking in the direction of the enemy Ken could see nothing beyond a distance of about a hundred yards. A dense pall of smoke from the burning war-canoes set up an impenetrable barrage.

The other fire-arms were nowhere to be seen. Ken had not noticed that his chum had snatched up the automatic. The rifle and the second shot-gun had vanished. Without them the

defence was greatly handicapped, since the effect of the fire-arms had been chiefly responsible for the repulse of the Nekas' reserves.

And, worst calamity of all, Gerald was missing.

Ken shuddered. He would have felt a measure of relief to learn that his chum had been killed. That loss would have been hard enough for Ken to bear.

Missing! That conjured up pictures of his one and only friend, a prisoner in the hands of these merciless savages, with the prospect of being put to indescribable tortures before the end—to be sacrificed on the hideous altar and his body devoured by the cannibal inhabitants of Neka.

Behind a rifle Kilsyth had been a "strong man armed." Deprived of the weapons of civilization he was no better and probably worse as a fighting man than the majority of his olive-skinned subjects. In addition he was physically ill—hardly able to stand.

Making his painful way to the main defence, Ken ordered the horn to be sounded to summon the chiefs. Out of twenty-three only eight responded to the call. The rest had either fallen or were with their followers in the mountains.

Vainly the lad suggested a sortie to attempt to recapture his chum or at least avenge him. With perfect sincerity the chiefs pointed out that the Kilba fighting men were greatly outnumbered, that they had suffered much and were fatigued. They were fortunate, they added, in being

behind stout defences. What could they hope to do without their town walls when even their King could scarcely stand? He could not lead them; therefore, according to the custom of Kilba, the warriors must remain with their King.

Even in his anxiety and grief, Ken knew that the chiefs' objections were reasonable. Although the laxity of the whole tribe was directly responsible for the greatest disaster that had yet overtaken the Kilbas, now was not the time to reprove them for it. Fully alive to the hazardous nature of their position, the natives were now doing their utmost to repair the mischief. Yet the situation was desperate enough in all conscience.

Ken and the chiefs were still debating when an alarm was raised by the men guarding the principal gate. Order and cohesion were now well established. The warriors manning the walls remained where they were, but a body of seasoned fighting men, numbering about fifty, had been detached to be held in readiness to reinforce any part of the defence threatened by an attack. These reserves at once rushed to the gate.

It was one of the recognized duties of the King of Kilba to be in the place where danger threatened most. Feeling horribly weak, Ken ordered the state litter to be brought. It was an elaborate affair consisting of a woven rush seat fixed between two poles and provided with a carved cedar-wood canopy.

In this conveyance Ken was carried to the gate. Already masses of Nekas were forming

up at about two hundred yards from the defences. Many of the warriors carried bundles of flax soaked in oil, ready to be set alight and cast over the wall. Others bore large tree trunks slung by grass ropes. These were for the purpose of battering down the gate. Every man in the Neka army was shouting at the top of his voice with the intended object of striking terror into the hearts of the silent and resolute defenders.

From the Neka ranks a horn blared. After the third blast silence fell upon the attackers, and a tall warrior, wearing a feather cloak and a grotesque mask, strode towards the defenders' position.

Just beyond arrow-shot he halted and began to taunt the Kilba warriors. He did so in no mild terms. He told them plain home-truths with biting sarcasm.

The Neka tongue is closely allied to the Kilba language, and even Ken, with his limited knowledge of the latter, could follow the trend of the Neka chief's diatribe.

"Lizards who eat dirt!" shouted the warrior. "Know you that your white King is our captive."

This announcement confirmed Kilsyth's worst fears. Hayes was a prisoner. The fact that the Nekas had mistaken him for his chum mattered little.

"Your King," continued the Neka chief, "will live for a time, yet he will wish for death. Until the Festival of the First Fruits will we keep him as a trophy of our prowess. On the even

of the Festival he will go to the home of *Bonga Te Akka*."

That announcement produced a marked effect upon the Kilbas. They groaned dismally. Hitherto they had listened with derision on their features.

"Good heavens!" muttered Ken. "What does that mean?"

Bonga, he knew, was an exaggerated form of "great." *Te Akka* was the term applied to a sort of primitive grinding implement, consisting of a hollow stone into which fits the convex face of another stone. *Bonga Te Akka*, then, meant the enormous or gigantic mill stone.

"As for you lizards who sleep with both your eyes shut," continued the Neka, "my warriors will eat you up. Fire and spear shall be your portion. Man, woman and child—all will tread the gateway of black night from which no one returns."

"If only I had my rifle," thought Ken. "Who is that empty bladder?" he asked of one of the chiefs standing by the side of the latter.

"Tia-Na," was the reply.

"And what is the *Bonga Te Akka*?"

The chief remained silent. He looked ill at ease. In vain Ken repeated the question.

"It is something of which we dare not speak," was the only response.

Meanwhile the notorious Tia-Na had turned and was striding majestically back to his followers. Apart from his reference to *Bonga*

Te Akka, his threats seemed to have no other effect upon the Kilbas other than to strengthen their fortitude and resolution to resist to the bitter end.

As soon as Tia-Na returned to his army the Nekas divided into two almost equal forces. Either was capable of swamping the Kilbas by sheer weight of numbers, but the invaders were leaving nothing to chance. At sea their tactics were to attack in half-moon formation. They employed similar means when fighting in the open on land. But against the mud walls of Kilba town, one half of the attackers attacked at one point and the other half at another. Occasionally both divisions would feign alternate assaults and not press them home. This was with the idea of keeping the numerically inferior defenders rushing from one point to another, and not only tiring them out but keeping them on tenterhooks—one of the severest tests to which fighting men can be subjected.

Ordering his litter to be raised above the parapet, Ken tried by his example to encourage his subjects. He was still feeling weak and dizzy. Perhaps it was on that account that the moonlight seemed less brilliant than it had a few minutes ago.

He looked up at the orb of night. He was not mistaken. A dark disc was slowly creeping over the edge of the moon. It was the first phase of a lunar eclipse.

About the same time the phenomenon was

noticed by the Nekas. Their war-cries were stilled. They could only gaze in astonishment and terror at the sight of what they firmly believed to be the demon Kali eating up the Queen of Night. Instead of shouts of fierce exultation and savage threats against their enemies, the Nekas were mute with terror and stood rooted to the spot.

The Kilbas, too, were equally affected. As the light grew dimmer and dimmer they threw themselves to the ground, hiding under their oblong shields. Even the bearers of the royal litter dropped the poles and grovelled in the dust.

Scrambling from the chair, Ken stood up and looked over the parapet. Now was the opportunity. If he could but induce the defenders to make a sortie the terrified Nekas could be scattered without difficulty and Hayes could be recaptured.

But the Kilbas would not rally. With his limited knowledge of the language, Ken could not give a brief scientific explanation of the phenomenon, and his subjects were too panic-stricken to listen if he could.

Seizing a spear, Ken began to prod several of the cowering warriors. He prodded hard. He was worked up into a passion at the cowardly conduct of these huge and muscular men. They whimpered like children, but refused to bestir themselves.

"If the Nekas are like that," thought the lad,

“Gerald can be rescued even if I have to go alone. I’ll do it!”

Retaining the spear, the haft of which served as a stick to assist his unsteady legs, Ken made his way to the gate. For a while he strove ineffectually to remove the heavy wooden bars. He called to some of the men to assist him. They would not stir, not even when he beat them with all the strength of his exhausted arms.

Remained the wall and ditch. At all costs Kilsyth determined to risk a twelve-feet drop and getting out of the deep fosse on to the outer face of the wall.

But there were limits even to his indomitable resolution. Even as he hoisted himself in the now almost total darkness to the top of the broad parapet, he felt as if the solid earth were swaying and heaving like the deck of a ship in a gale.

Then merciful unconsciousness again overtook him, and he remembered nothing more until he found himself lying on his bed in the palace and bright sunshine streaming in through the openings that served as windows.

He clapped his hands—the recognized signal when one in authority requires the presence of an inferior. In spite of the feeble effort, the summons was heard and answered.

Toto, his principal attendant, and another chief came hurrying into the room, grinning broadly.

"Thy gonna, O King!" announced Toto.
"All gonna—canoe. Neka clear outa."

"And Haya, my brother; where is he?" demanded Kenneth wildly.

The two Kilbas shrugged their shoulders. Evidently they considered Hayes' capture and disappearance of small moment compared with their relief at the precipitate flight of the invaders.

Not until the eclipse was almost over had both parties of natives bestirred themselves. The Nekas, accepting the phenomenon as a warning from the gods, had rushed pell-mell to their canoes. Yet in their hurried flight they had taken Gerald Hayes with them—Ken's chum doomed to a terrible fate.

"Go!" ordered Kenneth fiercely, and when Toto and his companion hurried out of the room the lad turned his aching face to the wall.

"If only the eclipse had taken place when the Nekas first landed," he groaned, "Gerald would be with me now. And now it's too late, too late!"

CHAPTER XXII

A RACE AGAINST TIME

PRESENTLY Ken rose from his couch. In spite of his aching head and the feeling of utter weakness he felt he simply must be doing something. Inaction was unbearable. But what could he do?

There was not a single canoe left untouched by fire. Pursuit of the demoralized Nekas was out of the question. Already their black sails were out of sight. Perhaps even now Gerald was being dragged in triumph to the stone of sacrifice. But had not the Neka chief Tia-Na proclaimed his intention of keeping his captive until the Feast of the First Fruits. When was that?

Kenneth again summoned his attendants.

The now once more attentive Toto was conversing in low tones with his companion in the shade of the veranda.

"The King is angry," he remarked, stating an obvious truth. "He will not sleep. Even now he is walking up and down in his wrath. He does not rejoice that the Nekas have gone."

"It is his brother he mourns," declared the other. "That I cannot understand. A man who

is not, is not. The King should be glad that his kinsman went fighting and died not with sickness or old age, which is an evil thing for a Kilba warrior."

The Kilbas never considered any of their people who had the misfortune to be taken prisoners as other than dead men. If they were not, they soon would be. That was the general view.

"The King is angry," reiterated Toto gloomily. "It is because he has not slept. It is true that when we carried him here from the wall his *nia* (soul) was away on a far journey, but it returned."

Toto nodded. According to Kilba ideas the *nia* of a human being leaves its abode when a person is unconscious, apparently with the idea of ascertaining the state of its future abode. If the *nia* is satisfied it does not return to the body. That is the native interpretation of death.

"Take the King a cup of the water of forgetfulness," continued Toto's companion. "Then he will sleep and awake refreshed and be no longer angry."

Toto thought this quite a good idea. He had barely prepared the brew, which contained a strong but tasteless narcotic, when Kenneth clapped his hands a second time.

"When do the Nekas celebrate the Feast of the First Fruits?" asked Ken.

"Maka four moon," replied Toto, meaning that the harvest would be gathered in about four months' time.

"And what is *Bonga Te Akka*?" continued the anxious lad. "You were with me when that villain Tia-Na shouted that name."

Toto's hands trembled so violently that some of the liquid was spilt from the gourd he held.

Ken repeated the question.

"There is nothing for you to fear," he added.

Without replying the native set the gourd on a stool and went out. In half a minute or so he returned with his short, stabbing spear. The point of this he held to his neck close to the jugular vein.

"*Konza nai*," exclaimed Ken, using the native term signifying "It is not required."

He knew then it was hopeless to obtain information concerning the "Great Mill Stone" from Toto, or indeed from any Kilba. The man was ready to drive his spear into his own throat rather than give the faintest inkling of the nature of the terrible and mysterious *Bonga Te Akka*.

Setting aside the spear Toto proffered the gourd and its liquid contents. Ken was desperately thirsty. He drank that liquid without question, thinking it was the usual Kilba beverage, the pleasant and nameless concoction of a species of nettles.

He awoke forty-eight hours later, refreshed in mind, free of the throbbing pain in his head, but ravenously hungry.

Toto, now again like a devoted dog, saw that his master's appetite was satisfied, and, after the

lad had fed, told him that he had slept "for two suns," i.e. two whole days.

After bathing and putting on clean clothes Ken ordered the chiefs to be assembled for a discussion. Could he but arouse their enthusiasm, much might be done before the Feast of the First Fruits—but what an uphill task it would be!

Temporarily free from the presence of the hereditary enemies the Kilbas were beginning to grasp the full facts of the result of their neglect of work in the pursuits of pleasure. Reports from the inhabitants of outlying villages that had escaped fire and pillage had come in. According to a rough estimate the available number of warriors was just short of a thousand. Probably the total population had diminished to between four and five thousand. There was enough food in the town to keep them alive for perhaps a month if the stock were carefully doled out, after a portion had been set aside for sowing. Some of the crops on the terraces or the mountain sides and in the valley between had escaped destruction, together with some small groves of coco-palms. The live stock, too, had suffered heavily.

Chiefs were deputed to go into the matter with the King's authority. Ken, knowing little about husbandry, was not the sort of person to pretend that he did. Having impressed upon the council the urgency of warding off starvation and providing food for the future, he knew the task

would be pursued with vigour under the supervision of his deputies.

Then he pointed out that it was of little use to grow more crops if the Nekas were to come again and ravage the island. Except for the depleted fighting force, Kilba was unprotected. Her main defence, the efficient fleet of war-canoes, had been wiped out. With a small yet powerful flotilla the passage through the reefs could be securely held against the numerically superior canoes of their enemies.

But war-canoes, although they can be destroyed in a few minutes, cannot be constructed in a day. With their rough tools the Kilbas considered that it took "two moons" to build a large war canoe.

"We must have so many within two moons," declared Kenneth, holding up the fingers and thumb of each hand.

"It is not enough," protested one of the chiefs.

"It will be enough," persisted the young King firmly.

He knew that if his plans matured, ten war canoes would be sufficient to effect his chum's rescue—if that were humanly possible. In any case they would form "a fleet in being," an absolute essential if Kilba were to be immune from invasion.

Ken made no attempt to upbraid his subjects and reproach them for their negligence. They had learnt their lesson. Never again would the

sentinels on the mountain tops relax their vigilance or the warriors suffer their spears to be set aside, and their stock of arrows to dwindle.

The older men, the women and children set to work to till and sow the devastated fields.

The soil of Kilba Island is so fertile that three crops a year are quite a usual occurrence, so it was possible that before the present meagre stocks were exhausted the new crops could be gathered. Even then several years would elapse before food was as abundant as of yore.

The ten canoes were put in hand as soon as possible. The Kilba craft were neither dug-outs nor planked; they were a compromise. The hull below the water-line was constructed from a single tree, shaped and hollowed out by means of stone implements and fire. Above the water-line they were built up of stout planks fastened by wooden pins or trenails. Their weak point was their vulnerability to the bows of a deliberately colliding boat; and conversely their most successful mode of attack was by ramming, although that manœuvre often resulted in severely damaging their own bows.

Ken watched the work progress until the hulls were nearly ready for launching; then he got busy. He told the astonished chiefs that the new canoes were good but that they were not good enough. Certain alterations must be made, and made they were, notwithstanding the deep-rooted prejudice of the islanders against any departure from their time-honoured methods.

For the first time in the history of Kilba the war-canoes were furnished with metal rams. True these were of crude construction, fashioned from iron plates removed from the old *Mumtaz*. The late King had had them conveyed to the island, but with what intention no one but himself knew, and he died before he could do anything with them.

Next Kenneth had stout beams built projecting from the sides to a distance of between six and seven feet. The extremities of these beams were connected by brass rails that at one time enclosed the bridge of the *Mumtaz*. When the supply of brass ran short, copper piping and flexible wire made up the deficiency.

Thus a protection was formed against any attempt at ramming by a hostile canoe. The soft metal, yielding slightly to the impact, would render the blow harmless and stop the momentum of the colliding craft before she came within easy distance for her crew to board.

The Kilbas realizing this obvious improvement, waxed enthusiastic. Ken proceeded with his next protective device.

This consisted of providing sloping upper-works of wood coated either with thin sheets of iron from the ship's tanks or of pigskin. This was amply sufficient to stop either an arrow or any of the large stones that the Nekas were in the habit of hurling at their foes.

Then came the young King's hardest task in connection with the equipment of his new navy.

With this protective device it was out of the question for the canoes to be propelled by paddles. The men wielding them must of necessity be exposed to the missiles of the enemy as they leant overside to execute the stroke. The paddles were "scrapped," and in their place oars measuring about eighteen feet in length were substituted. Each oar was double and sometimes treble-banked—that is, two or three rowers to each oar, which projected through narrow slits in the protected upperworks.

At first the natives were very much against this innovation. They had paddled their canoes; so had their fathers before them, and their forefathers back to times immemorable; so why not continue to do so?

But when the first of the new fleet was launched and the crew after a series of exasperating and heart-breaking trials gained sufficient proficiency to display their prowess as oarsmen, the spectators were astonished at the war-canoes' speed. Not only was the oar-propelled craft quite twice as fast as the now destroyed canoes had been, but it was handier for manœuvring purposes, turning in almost her own length.

Although he regretted the loss of the fire-arms, Ken did not mean to waste the remaining ammunition. The 12-bore with the broken stock had been recovered, but the damage was not confined to that. The barrels had been bent at about six inches from the muzzles, otherwise the mechanism was intact. To attempt

to fire a cartridge was out of the question. The weapon would burst in the firer's hands.

So the lad set to work to saw through the barrels and to trim the broken stock to the shape of a pistol-butt. Thus he had virtually a large bore double-barrelled pistol that "kicked" like a mule and spread the shots like a blunderbuss.

Since the remaining ammunition for the rifle and the automatic—Ken often wondered what had become of the latter weapon—was useless for the 12-bore, Kenneth set to work to use the cordite in roughly-made bombs.

These were constructed from empty tins, for several cases of "tinned" foods had been brought to the island from the *Mumtaz*. The bursting charge consisted of cordite mixed with powder obtained from signal rockets. The latter were useless for their proper purpose owing to the powder deteriorating through damp; but mixed with cordite fresh from the cartridges, the combination produced quite a powerful explosive. In addition it emitted a dense smoke and gave a very loud report—an advantage when used against savages.

Rusty nails from packing-cases, scraps of old metal and small pebbles formed the missiles contained in the bombs, while fuses were made from tow soaked in salt water, then rubbed in grains of powder and finally dried.

With considerable misgivings, Ken mustered his "bombing party" for instruction. As demon-

strator the chiefest risks were his. He had to take his chance of the fuse burning too quickly. On the other hand, if the spark took too long to reach the bursting charge the missile in actual combat might be returned by the foe with disastrous results to the Kilba warriors.

Standing well in front of his men, Ken lighted the fuse from a firebrand—the last match had been long since used—blew upon the sizzling tow until it was smouldering strongly.

Then he hurled the bomb in professional cricket style.

The bomb burst with an ear-splitting detonation. Splinters and scraps of metal whizzed perilously close to the lad's head. The effective radius of action was greater than he expected.

"That won't do," he muttered, and turned his head to see what the men under instruction were doing.

To his consternation every one of them was lying face downwards and emitting dismal groans!

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Kenneth. "I've laid the lot of them out!"

He had; but not in the way he feared. Not a man had received as much as a scratch. Sheer terror at the "smoke-devil" had bowled them over.

However Ken persevered. He reduced the weight of the explosives, and after a few more demonstrations induced one of the warriors to show his prowess at bomb-throwing. Before long

he had ten good men at this work and a supply—thanks to the reduced charges—of between fifty and sixty bombs.

At length the small but efficient fleet of war-canoes was completed. Ken had worked and to a purpose. Defence was all very well, but he meant to take the offensive. By so doing he might be able to effect his chum's rescue, which would never be accomplished by sitting down and awaiting another invasion from the savage Nekas.

The Feast of the First Fruits was now only a month away.

CHAPTER XXIII

A BID FOR SEA POWER

NOTWITHSTANDING his anxieties Ken Kilsyth was a proud youth when as King of Kilba he led his small fleet to sea for the first time.

It was a perfect morning. Although hardly a ripple ruffled the surface of the lagoon quite a steady breeze was blowing outside the reefs.

In line ahead the efficient flotilla of war-canoes threaded their way through the intricate channel and gained the open sea. Here oars were laid aside and the huge sails spread before the breeze and a course shaped for Neka.

Just before noon the island showed above the horizon, and an hour and a half later the Kilba fleet was within a couple of miles of their enemies' territory.

Compared with beautiful Kilba, Neka was a grim and forbidding spot. It consisted almost entirely of a rocky plateau rising sheer from the water and surrounded by a complication of half-tide shoals and reefs. At no less than a dozen places deep, narrow ravines pierced the cliffs, some of them containing a sufficient depth of water to float the numerous war-canoes of the

Nekas. Not a hut nor any sign of habitation was visible. The chief town and about half a dozen fairly large villages were situated in slight depressions on the plateau and were consequently hidden from the sea.

Somewhere on that gloomy island Gerald Hayes was languishing, perhaps in physical torment. That is, if the Neka chief Tia-Na was keeping his word to sacrifice his illustrious captive on the Feast of the First Fruits.

Ken realized that his first task was to settle with the Neka fleet. To make straight for the island would be bad policy. Not only would the Nekas "smell a rat" at the bold attitude of the ten Kilba canoes, but the latter would be at a decided disadvantage during their progress in single line ahead through the reefs.

Accordingly Kilsyth ordered the course to be changed as if a mere handful of canoes was attempting to skirt the island for observation purposes.

The ruse was successful. Within a few minutes of the alteration of direction Neka war-canoes were observed emerging from their secure retreats at four separate points, and soon about a hundred and twenty of them were tearing across the lagoon to intercept the seemingly reckless ten.

Being dead to lee'ard of their foes, the Nekas could not make use of their sails. They had to paddle right in the teeth of a fairly stiff breeze. Also they fell into a state of confusion owing to so many canoes bunching together in their efforts

to crowd through the narrow channel at the same time.

As soon as the foremost of the hostile canoes drew clear of the reef, Kenneth ordered sail to be lowered and the oars manned. The Kilba canoes then feigned flight, purposely slowing down to deceive the enemy as to their actual speed and also to conserve the energies of the oarsmen.

At the supposed flight of their enemies the Nekas lost all sense of caution. No longer puzzled at the impudent appearance of ten canoes, which were now apparently "legging it for all they were worth," the enemy put all their energies into the pursuit, confident that with a ten to one superiority their task would be an easy one.

For nearly an hour the pursuit was maintained. Then the veteran helmsman of the King of the Kilbas' canoe turned to his lord.

"We must go no farther, O King!" he declared. "Even now we are very near the outermost reefs."

Kenneth agreed. He knew that between the coral reefs surrounding both Kilba and Neka Islands there was a fairly shallow expanse yet sufficiently deep to be of no danger to light-draughted craft. On the outer edge of this wide basin—it was nearly twenty miles in diameter—was an almost complete circle of barrier-reefs. There were passages between the rocks, but even the most experienced natives did not know their way through.

The lad glanced astern. The nearest of the pursuing canoes was about a mile away. There were about fifteen of them fairly close together, with a space of nearly two miles between them and the main Neka fleet. The latter was strung out over a wide area, seemingly without any cohesion or order of battle.

At the signal from the King's canoe—one blast from a horn—the Kilba flotilla turned almost simultaneously. The rowers who had been pulling steadily during the pursuit handed their oars over to fresh oarsmen and, double-banked, the ten war-canoes swooped down upon the detached section of the Neka fleet.

With every muscle strained the stalwart Kilba oarsmen pulled their utmost. Except for half a dozen warriors crouching in the bows of each canoe and sheltering behind their shields, and a similar number gathered aft, not a man in the Kilba flotilla was visible. There was something decidedly uncanny about the appearance of these swiftly moving craft as viewed from a Neka standpoint. Too late the erstwhile pursuers realized that they had been trapped.

In vain they attempted to turn and flee. Even as the unwieldy canoes swung broadside on to the Kilbas, the sharp, metal-shod stems of the latter's boats crashed into their frail sides. In several cases the Neka canoes were cut completely asunder, and the ramming craft held on in pursuit of her next victim.

Too demoralized to offer any resistance—even

to the extent of letting fly a shower of their poisoned arrows—the isolated group of Neka was practically annihilated; while, except for the smashing of three or four oars and some slight damage done to their bows, the Kilba war-canoes were intact. Not a spear thrust was made on the part of the Kilbas; not a bomb thrown, nor a single cartridge fired from Ken's cut-down shot-gun.

The Kilbas then headed for the Neka main fleet. These were made of sterner stuff. Perhaps they had confidence in their numbers. Avoiding the blunder their vanguard had made, the Neka canoes kept stern on to their pursuers, thus diminishing the chances of being rammed.

Selecting a gap between two of the enemy craft, Ken ordered his canoe to be taken between the pair.

Greeted by a flight of arrows which struck harmlessly into the sloping woodwork protecting the oarsmen, the canoe dashed between the two Neka craft. One bomb, accurately timed, burst on the one to starboard, killing and wounding many of her crew and spreading consternation amongst the survivors.

The next instant the Neka canoe to port swung diagonally athwart the bows of Ken's craft and hung there until the latter's way brought both canoes almost close alongside each other.

The impact was severe. Almost every oar on the port side of the Kilba canoe was smashed,

many of the rowers being hurled from their benches by the concussion. Even Ken and the warriors with him staggered with the shock.

With yells of fury the Nekas attempted to board. It was now that the outriggered metal rods proved their worth. Instead of being able to jump straight into the Kilba canoe the boarders had to swing themselves either over or under the bars and then make their way along the projecting pieces of timber extending from the sides.

The attempt was a failure. Many of the Nekas were cut down as they tackled the obstacle. Only two gained the sloping roofs protecting the Kilba oarsmen. One was a chief wearing a red-feathered cloak and a grotesque mask.

Even as they stood irresolute upon the slippery woodwork the two canoes drifted apart, cutting off their retreat. One of the Kilbas armed only with the haft of a broken oar, scrambled through a gap in the protective covering and, stealing upon the two Nekas from behind, brought both of them down by delivering a smart blow behind their knees.

"Hold them!" shouted Ken above the din.
"Make them prisoners!"

Just then a bomb thrown into the canoe that had ineffectually tried to board her opponent made her crew lose all interest in the fight.

The loss of nearly all the oars on the port side was a serious matter as far as Ken's craft was concerned. She had to drop astern while some of the oars were transferred from the starboard

side, and during this operation the other Kilba canoes, according to their custom, gathered round their King's craft to protect him.

Most of them had suffered damage, especially to the oars. This was mainly owing to Kilsyth's lack of experience in these matters; for, instead of making the aperture corresponding to a boat's rowlock sufficiently wide to allow the oar to swing back until the blade was protected by the metal outriggers, he had not allowed sufficient "play."

Unfortunately the delay in rearranging the oars gave the Nekas an opportunity to escape—and they took it. Realizing that they were "up against" opposing vessels of an entirely new type and which in spite of their scanty numbers were capable of dealing terrifically hard knocks and sustaining little loss themselves, the Nekas fled homewards. One of the by no means least important factors that contributed to their terror was that caused by the explosion of the bombs. The moral effect of the blinding flash and the stunning report was even greater than the material result. To them it looked as if the gods had lent the Kilbas a supply of lighting and thunder.

Kilsyth realized that the victory was incomplete. The main portion of the enemy fleet had escaped. True, it was hardly likely that it would put out again and offer battle to the now immeasurably superior Kilba war-canoes; but Neka Island was practically impossible to invade,

owing to the inferior numbers both of Kilbas and their canoes.

Kenneth was on the point of giving orders for the fleet to make for home when Toto came aft, smiling broadly.

"We have made some prisoners, O King!" he exclaimed in his quaint English.

"True," agreed Ken.

"Does the King know who one of them is named?" pursued the faithful Kilba.

"Surely not the Neka chief Tia-Na?" asked the lad hopefully.

Toto, grinning still more, shook his head.

"No, O King! But one of the prisoners is Sula-Na, the chief's eldest son."

"Then, treat him well," rejoined Ken.

Second to the news that the prisoner was the notorious and implacable Tia-Na, was this important information. The fight, then, had not been in vain. Would it be possible, thought the lad, to offer to release Sula-Na in exchange for Gerald Hayes?

CHAPTER XXIV

BLUFF !

GREETED uproariously by almost the entire population of Kilba, the ten war-canoes arrived at the island and were promptly hauled up well above high-water mark.

Although he built considerable hopes on being able to use Sula-Na as a lever to shake the father's vindictive decision to sacrifice Hayes on the Feast of the First Fruits, Ken was not content to remain inactive pending the Neka chief's reply.

Repairs to the canoes were put in hand without delay and various alterations, the necessity for which were made apparent during the recent fight, were proceeded with.

The difficulty was that although the Kilba flotilla was more than a match for the Nekas, it was impossible to maintain a blockade of the latter's island. Nor could the Kilbas land and ravage the crops of their foes. Consequently the inhabitants of Neka could not be starved out.

Closely guarded but otherwise well treated Sula-Na was by no means grateful for the consideration afforded him. He was a villainous-

looking son of a villainous father, although he did not possess the iron will and astuteness of his sire.

As soon as possible a light outrigger canoe was built and launched. Three of the twenty-odd Neka prisoners were told that they were free to depart if they took a message to their chief Tia-Na. If they returned with a message from their rulers they would be rewarded and permitted to go back to Neka.

Since writing was unknown to the natives Ken's message was sent by word of mouth. In it he stated that Sula-Na was a prisoner, but would be released unharmed if Tia-Na set his white captive free and sent him back to Kilba.

This message the three envoys promised to deliver and return with the chief's answer; and escorted by two of the war-canoes the outrigger left for Neka Island.

The war-canoes returned before sunset, their crews having reported that they had seen from a distance the envoys land and be received by their fellow tribesmen.

Ken waited—and went on with his preparations.

He sent for Sula-Na. The prisoner was brought in with his limbs free, although there were armed guards standing by ready to overpower the Neka chief's son should he offer violence.

Sula-Na stood erect, with a haughty stare on his far from handsome features. The fact that

he made no attempt to offer obeisance to the King of Kilba angered Ken's attendants.

"Let us slay the stiff-necked swine!" they urged.

Ken ordered them to be still. He did not mind in the least whether Sula-Na *kow-towed* or not. All he wanted was certain information.

Addressing the captive in the Kilba dialect, Kenneth asked him concerning the welfare or otherwise of his "brother," for the Nekas were still under the impression that Gerald was King of Kilba and for certain reasons Ken did not wish to enlighten them.

Sula-Na preserved a sullen silence.

Thinking that this was owing to his being unable to understand the Kilba language as spoken by a white man—although there was very little difference between the dialects of Kilba and Neka—Kilsyth told Toto to interpret.

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders and made an insulting grimace.

"Let the pig be put to the torture of the hot stones, O King," suggested one of the Kilba chiefs. "That will make him open his mouth."

"Not so," replied Ken. "We are not Nekas. We do not torture the captives of our bows and spears."

Sula-Na opened his mouth—but for the purpose of putting out his tongue! This was one of the greatest insults a Neka imagined he could make.

He had mistaken Kenneth's mildness for

weakness and fear of the possibility of retribution on the part of the chief of the Nekas should his son be harmed.

"I'd like to boot the lout," thought the lad, "only it isn't cricket."

Ignoring the affront, he turned to his interpreter.

"Ask Sula-Na to tell me who or what is the *Bonga Te Akka*," he said.

For the first time during the interview the Neka showed signs of attention. A look of deep, calculated cunning spread over his features. Almost eagerly he fixed his eyes upon Toto as if to assist him to put the question.

Not a sound came from Toto's lips. His olivine skin turned an ashen grey. His limbs twitched.

"Put my question to the prisoner," ordered Ken sternly, although he, too, was affected by the sight of the Kilba's obvious terror.

"Great King, I cannot!" stammered Toto, going down on his knees and holding his hands over his face.

"Why not?" demanded the lad, determined to put a brave face on the matter and to assert his authority. "Why fear the *Bonga Te Akka*? Am I not King of Kilba? And have not my war-canoes driven the canoes of Neka off the sea? Did *Bonga Te Akka* save them from defeat?"

Toto still refused to put the question.

Then Sula-Na took up his parable:

“ Since when has it been the custom in Kilba for one man to call himself King when his predecessor still lives ? ” he demanded. “ Hearken, O son of a goat and brother of a goat ! Your brother the King of Kilba will of a certainty see the *Bonga Te Akka*. Of a truth he will wish that he never was born. You also will see *Bonga Te Akka*. I have spoken.”

The Kilba warriors guarding the prisoner stood aghast at the words ; but whether on account of the deliberate insults levelled at their King or by reason of the Neka's threat to him concerning the mysterious “ Enormous Mill Stone ”—to give the literal translation of the words—Ken knew not.

At all costs he must demonstrate his powers, in order to reassure his men and cow the insolent Sula-Na.

“ Bring me a water-pot,” he ordered. “ A very big one.”

Half a dozen Kilbas came into the room staggering under the load of an enormous earthenware vessel filled with water.

This they set down and looked inquiringly at their King.

“ Place that wood over the mouth of the jar and set this seat on top of the wood,” continued Ken, indicating a grotesquely carved seat that formed part of the state furniture of the royal dwelling.

This was done. Even Sula-Na showed interest in the proceedings.

"Make the prisoner sit there," ordered Kenneth, pointing to the elevated seat.

The Neka, beginning to realize that matters looked serious for him, was placed in the chair.

Ken produced his 12-bore shot gun with the cut-off barrels and ostentatiously placed a cartridge in the breech of one.

Sula-Na's jaw dropped. Here was white man's magic. Although he had not seen any sort of fire-arm at close quarters before, he began to connect those twin tubes with the lightning and thunder that had wrought havoc amongst the Neka warriors.

Holding the muzzle of the weapon within a foot of the earthenware pot, Ken discharged the pistol. In the confined space the din was terrific. The pottery was shattered. The water gushed in all directions, while in the midst of the debris sprawled the son of the notorious Tia-Na—humiliated beyond measure in the sight of his enemies.

Scared out of his wits and hardly knowing whether he was alive or dead, Sula Na wriggled like a capsized turtle.

Ken waited patiently until the Neka had extricated himself from his undignified position.

"Hearken, Sula-Na!" he exclaimed sternly. "The earthenware vessel represented Neka and you that bubble they call *Bonga Te Akka*. Even as I have broken to pieces the earthenware, so will I smash Neka, and with it *Bonga Te Akka* will fall. I have spoken."

Furtively feeling various parts of his anatomy and finding that he was unhurt except for a few slight cuts from the broken pieces of pottery, the Neka could not resist making a provocative reply.

"True," he admitted, "the jar is broken, but you have not destroyed *Bonga Te Akka*."

Ken raised his empty fire-arm.

"Shall I show how I will destroy *Bonga Te Akka*?" he asked, levelling the weapon at the Neka's bare chest.

This was too much for Sula-Na's courage. In all probability he would not have flinched at a spear-thrust, but the imminent possibility of his chest being blown in by white man's magic was too terrible to contemplate.

"Enough, O King!" he protested brokenly.

Ken lowered the weapon. He had scored, for not only had he cowed the truculent native, but he had compelled him to address him as King.

"I wonder if my bluff will help poor old Gerald," thought the lad as Sula-Na was removed.

During the following forenoon an outrigger canoe was seen approaching the island.

The envoys were returning.

Hardly able to restrain his impatience, Ken waited at the stone of audience in the open space in front of the palace. It would be contrary to Kilba custom and lowering the dignity of the King for him to go to the waterfront to receive the Neka messengers.

At last they came into the royal presence and delivered Tia-Na's reply :

" I have five-and-twenty sons and it matters little that one should demean himself by falling into the hands of the Kilba dogs. What I have spoken concerning the white man I hold prisoner I have spoken. On the eve of the Feast of the First Fruits he shall be sacrificed to *Bonga Te Akka.*"

The eve of the Feast of the First Fruits was now only ten days away.

CHAPTER XXV

BONGA TE AKKA

STRETCHED upon a rough bed of reeds, Gerald Hayes was sleeping soundly. It was early in the evening of the day preceding the Neka Feast of the First Fruits, but the lad was happily in ignorance of the fact.

During his captivity Hayes had not been actually ill-treated. His hardships had been many, his food meagre, and his lodgings varied both in location and condition. Several times he had been brought out and displayed to the natives on the occasion of tribal festivities. They had mocked and jeered at him, throwing out hints as to the fate that was in store for him; but they had restrained from personal violence. Wherever he went he was closely guarded. Escape was out of the question. Even if he could have outwitted his custodians there were no means of getting clear of the cliff-surrounded island; and although there were hiding-places in plenty amongst the numerous ravines and in the caves, he would soon be faced with the alternative either of dying from starvation or having to surrender ignominiously to the natives.

The door of the hut was cautiously opened and an ochred warrior crept in and looked at the sleeping lad.

Without attempting to arouse the sleeper, the man went out and rejoined a group of half a dozen ferociously attired natives, whose features were completely hidden by hideous masks and whose garments consisted of stiffly padded woven reeds and leather girdles from which hung the bleached heads of former enemies.

These were the priests of *Bonga Te Akka*.

"He sleeps!" reported the warrior.

The priests grunted in unison. They were compelled to await until the victim awoke. It was one of the inviolable customs amongst the Nekas that on the island a sleeper must never be deliberately wakened under any circumstances. The natives had a great respect for sleep. According to their beliefs, the man who aroused a slumbering person would be tormented in the next world by the spirit of the individual whose sleep had been broken. They believed that during sleep the spirit leaves the body but hovers in the vicinity. During other forms of unconsciousness the spirit goes away on a far journey; while the failure of the *Kaula* to return is the Neka interpretation of death.

Even on their raids into Kilba territory the Nekas were loath to depart from the custom of awakening a sleeper although he were a foe. Should an enemy be surprised in his sleep and not be awakened by the din caused by the

attacker, he was spared—only to be speared when he opened his eyes!

Although nearly three thousand Nekas were assembled almost within an arrow's flight of the hut in which Hayes lay, such was their regard for the sacredness of sleep that they maintained almost complete silence even though they were on the tiptoe of expectation for the appearance of the sacrificial victim to the mysterious *Bonga Te Akka*.

Not even the all-powerful chief Tia-Na dared to give an order for the captive to be aroused.

It was not until an hour after moon-rise that Gerald opened his eyes. He stirred. At the faint sound of movement the warrior acting as his gaoler appeared.

"*Hia bia?*" (What is it?) asked the lad.

"*Vatu!*" (Come outside) ordered the man.

Hayes obeyed. Experience had long since taught him that delay in carrying out the commands of the captors meant trouble. Nevertheless his heart was in his throat when in the slanting rays of the full moon, his gaze fell upon the hideously-garbed priests.

His apprehension increased when, led between the captors, he saw the vast concourse that awaited his coming. Hitherto his appearances before the assembled natives had always been during the hours of daylight. His nights had been invariably undisturbed.

"I'm in for it this time," thought the lad, but concealing his apprehension and keeping a

stiff upper lip he walked with head erect between the dense crowds to the spot where Tia-Na, surrounded by his family and the principal chiefs, was seated.

"Welcome, white King of Kilba!" exclaimed Tia-Na with thinly veiled sarcasm. "We have heard of your magic and would fain see how it works against *Bonga Te Akka*. Give him the little dumb horn, O Kasi!"

Greatly to Gerald's surprise one of the chiefs stepped forward and handed him the automatic which he had been using when taken prisoner at the fight on the walls of Kilba Town. By returning the weapon, Tia-Na was only conferring to another custom of Neka which ordains that victims to *Bonga Te Akka* were to be provided with the weapons with which they fought when captured, principally to demonstrate the fact that arms were of no avail against the super-human power of the terrible and mysterious diety.

The chief of the Nekas had conceded to custom unwillingly. He was loath to part with the little automatic. He had seen it spit fire and death in the hands of the white man, but frequent attempts on his part to make it do likewise had failed. The intricate mechanism had baffled him.

Hayes took the weapon, hardly able to realize the fact and still more at a loss to understand the motive that prompted its return. Had he known he would not have hesitated to send a bullet

crashing through the brain of the cruel and savage Tia-Na. As it was he thrust the weapon into the pocket of his ragged coat.

"A pleasant journey!" exclaimed the chief, and beckoned to the lad's hideous attendants.

Deftly a coir rope to which was attached a sort of sheaveless pulley was passed round Hayes' waist and secured. Then, urged on by the priest, the lad was taken to the edge of a deep chasm, so deep that the slanting rays of the full moon illuminated only one-third of the face of the farthestmost cliff.

A native approached carrying a coil of rope. One end of the line was passed through the pulley and then made fast to a trunk of a palm tree thrust horizontally out over the vast pit.

Hayes' first sensations of fear had passed. The possession of the automatic had to no slight extent served to steady his tautened nerves. He reasoned that he was not going to be flung headlong into the yawning chasm, nor was he about to be hanged by the neck. Nevertheless the prospect of being suspended by the waist from the end of that projecting spar was not a pleasant one. It seemed remarkable too, that no attempt had been made to secure his hands and feet.

The crowd pressed around him in a dense semicircle. About twenty yards along the edge of the cliff Tia-Na was seated on his chair of state, from whence he could command an uninterrupted view of the proceedings.

Suddenly the dull boom of the drums and the shrill notes of the war-horns rent the air. For a full minute the din lasted. This was followed by the weird and monotonous chanting of the priests, during which every native raised both hands and bowed his face to the earth.

The meaning of the invocation was unknown as far as Gerald was concerned, yet he distinguished the frequent use of that mysterious name *Bonga Te Akka*.

At the end of the chant dead silence fell upon the crowd. Every eye was turned upon the unshrinking figure of the white man, eyes to detect signs of fear upon his set features.

Suddenly Gerald felt a pair of powerful arms grip him round the waist. He was lifted off his feet and swung once, twice, three times.

He gave an involuntary gasp as he felt himself hurtling through the air, but no shriek escaped his lips.

With a jerk the rope tautened. He was dangling six feet from the edge and fifty feet above the floor of the terrible chasm.

"He cried not!" shouted a voice. "It is a bad omen!"

"Bad for whom?" thought Hayes, catching the meaning of the words. Although he realized that something of a distinctly unpleasant nature was imminent, the lad felt strangely calm and collected. He was conscious of a strong desire to know what was coming next—much as if he were watching an exciting picture on the screen.

Slowly the rope was paid out. Lower and lower sank the suspended lad, turning round and round during his prolonged descent.

He looked downwards—an easy enough task since the point of suspension was now only just below his shoulder-blades. He saw nothing except a level floor of dull, greyish sand littered with white objects, a sight that reminded him of a popular pleasure resort on the day after a Bank Holiday.

By this time the moon had risen sufficiently high in the heavens to shed its light upon roughly two-thirds of the surface of the floor of the chasm. Owing to the brilliance of the light, the shadows were by contrast in intense blackness.

Hayes listened intently. Above him the multitude of spectators was hushed. Except for the faint rasp of the rope and the ceaseless murmur of the surf upon the distant reefs, not a sound disturbed the quietude of the moonlit night.

At length the captive's feet touched the ground. The moment the strain on the rope relaxed one end was dropped into the chasm, and drawn through the wooden "eye" attached to the cord round Hayes' waist. The whole rope was then hauled to the top of the abyss.

It was now evident that the Nekas meant that their white captive was to remain in that natural dungeon. All means of ascent were denied him. The walls, save for shallow fissures close to the bore, were smooth and inclining outwards. Except by the aid of a ladder or a rope it would

be a sheer impossibility for any human being to escape.

Gerald stood stock-still in the centre of the almost circular floor. Hearing or seeing nothing of a suspicious nature, he then drew his automatic and opened the breech. It was empty !

Aghast at the discovery, the lad broke into a cold sweat. The pistol, on which he relied in the hour of need, would appear to be useless either for offence or defence.

With trembling fingers, Gerald removed the cover of the magazine. Then his hopes rose. There were four unexpended cartridges. Fortunately the peculiarities of the weapon had baffled Tia-Na's curiosity whilst the automatic was in his possession. He had failed to discover the container in the stock where the ammunition had been placed.

Only a few months had elapsed since the chums first handled the automatic on board the S.S. *Mumtaz*. Then they bungled badly. By this time Hayes was well versed in the intricacies of the pistol, and deftly he transferred one cartridge to the breech and set the safety-catch.

Knowing that he was an object of interest for hundreds of pairs of eyes, Gerald made up his mind to refrain from any indications of panic. If danger threatened, as it most probably did, it would come from those dark recesses in the shadow of the moonlight. He kept his face turned in that direction and with every sense keenly on the alert awaited developments.

He took it for granted that he was not to die of slow starvation. The vast concourse of Nekas surrounding the chasm was not waiting for the consummation of an event that might not occur for days. Whatever it was was imminent.

As he waited, Hayes glanced at the ground. The sight made his brain reel. What, at first, he had taken for scraps of paper or white cloth was actually fragments of human bones, sufficient to cause no doubt as to the fact that they once formed parts of living men. There were bleached skulls. Not one of them was intact. Some had been cut into two distinct parts as if they had been sawn through or split by a terrific blow with an axe. Ribs, thigh-bones, arm-bones lay scattered indiscriminately, with hardly one of them whole. There were the remains of various weapons, too. He recognized the broad-bladed iron-stone spear-heads of the Kilbas, the triple-headed weapons of the Nekas. There was even a stone axe—all fractured and reduced to such a state as to be useless for the purpose they were once intended.

"They've been up against something," thought Gerald. "Well, we've tackled native warriors similarly armed and our fire-arms have come off best every time. I've a fighting chance anyway."

He waited and waited. The suspense was becoming acute. He almost hoped that the thing—whatever it might be—would not delay

its appearance. Since it had to come, let it, and the sooner the fray were over, either one way or the other, the better.

Suddenly Hayes heard a faint sound like rock rasping on rock. It lasted but a second or so, then there was silence again. Unless his sense of hearing deceived him, the sound came from somewhere in those deep shadows.

Deliberately—for his iron nerves had resumed their normal state—Gerald released the safety-catch of his automatic.

The sound came again. This time it was prolonged and of greater volume. It was exactly as if an enormous boulder was slowly sliding down a rocky incline.

Then into the dazzling moonlight came the thing.

It was oval-shaped, like an enormous cover of a soup tureen. The light reflected from its domed surface and upon the extremities of a set of sprawling tentacles and a most formidable pair of claws, while a pair of protruding and hideous eyes seemed to concentrate a dull red green upon the monster's intended victim.

"*Bonga Te Akka ! Bonga Te Akka !*" shouted the watching Nekas in deafening unison.

It was the largest crab imaginable. No wonder the native name for it signified the enormous millstone. Quite six feet across the shell it looked even larger in the ghostly moonlight. The dome of the shell was fully four feet above the ground as the hideous crustacean ambled

slowly over the ground, rocking like a tank on the crest of a mine-crater.

And its claws ! Each one quite eight feet in length, terminating in a pair of serrated nippers that opened so widely that they could seize a human body and sever it with one bite. As they closed they emitted a metallic clang.

For a few long-drawn-out moments *Bonga Te Akka* stopped, puzzled but by no means frightened at the deafening shouts of the Nekas on the edge of the abyss, many of whom in their eagerness were perilously near toppling over into the chasm.

Then increasing its pace the monster rushed towards its victim.

CHAPTER XXVI

WORSTED !

“ **I** MUST not throw away a single shot. I must aim steady,” were the thoughts that swept across Gerald’s mind, as the thing bore down towards him.

At less than ten paces, Hayes fired, aiming for the right eye of the crab.

He missed !

The nickle bullet glanced harmlessly from the armour-plated shell. In his pardonable haste the lad had not depressed the automatic sufficiently.

The monster stopped dead ; for the moment scared by the stunning report that echoed and re-echoed between the towering walls of the chasm.

The spectators were hushed. Then a voice exclaimed, “ Lo, the white man has shown his magic. It does not avail against the power of *Bonga Te Akka* ! ”

Up to now it did not.

The monster was preparing to renew its head-long advance. Even as it did so, Hayes fired his second shot. This time the bullet ploughed through one of the creature’s protruding eyes

and sent a miniature cloud of watery liquid spraying in all directions.

The monster reared, extending its claws and opening and closing its nippers with incredible rapidity. For a cold-blooded specimen of the animal kingdom, it was far more sensitive to pain than most of the lower orders of creation appear to be.

It was so close that Hayes did not dare risk another shot at this juncture. The thing to be done was to avoid those fearful nippers. The brute was blind in its right eye. The lad leapt to his left. He had actually to jump over the hindmost of the monster's legs.

Round swung the giant crab. In its half-blinded state it dashed one claw against the solid rock and encountering resistance bit again and again with its pincers at the unyielding wall of granite.

The combatants had now changed places. Hayes, with his back to the light had a clear view of the formidable monster to which he was opposed.

On the other hand, the crab, blinded in one eye, was dazzled by the strong moonlight, although the ghostly light intensified the hideousness of its appearance.

Again the giant crab bore down upon the lad. The automatic barked. Gerald's aim was true. The bullet tore completely through the monster's left eye. The brute was now totally blinded.

Yet it came on. The air was filled with the

sickening odour of human blood, for the crab had only recently feasted upon a less troublesome victim.

Hayes avoided the rush by less than a couple of feet. Although deprived of vision the terrible creature possessed an uncanny sense of smell. It swung round, using its feet much as a rowing crew turning their boat by pulling on one side and backing with the oars on the other side. The nippers closed with a ferocious snap where the lad's head had been a moment before.

Holding his ground, Gerald wiped the sweat from his eyes and awaited the third phase of the attack. So far he had scored heavily, but had he reached the limit of his good luck? With only one shot left and being in ignorance of the most vulnerable part of a crustacean's anatomy, he was quite aware that the fight was by no means settled in his favour.

The monster came on with considerable caution this time. Relying solely upon its acute sense of smell, it waved its flexible feelers in the air and turned aside with disconcerting accuracy when Hayes attempted to steal away from its former line of advance.

Suddenly the brute raised itself until it rested solely on its hindmost pair of legs and the after edge of its shell. The greater part of its greenish hued underbody was exposed.

The lad fired his last shot, aiming at the protuberance that marked the connecting muscles of the foremost pair of legs. One thing he knew, the

bullet had penetrated instead of glancing off; but whether it was likely to do serious injury was a mere hundred-to-one chance. It was much the same as probing a haystack with a pointed rod in the hope of transfixing a lurking rat.

The monster shuffled sideways, apparently not greatly harmed.

Hayes stood where he was. There was no need to shift his position at that juncture.

As he waited he was dimly aware of a sickening thud just behind him. One of the spectators, who like many of them had been holding a torch, had overbalanced and toppled headlong to his death on the floor of the abyss.

The torch was still burning. Hayes snatched it up. Here, at all events, was some sort of defence—better now than the unloaded automatic.

But to his surprise the monster had had enough. It swung round and crawled with a decided effort towards its lair.

Seized by a reckless fit of fury, the lad started in pursuit. Then he realized that again good fortune favoured him.

The vanquished crab's lair was a crevice with its floor thickly covered with dried seaweed and dead brushwood that during heavy gales had been carried completely over the cliff. The monster was still moving further into the deep crevice.

Hayes applied the torch to the inflammable stuff. In less than a minute, the flames were roaring fiercely.

Bonga Te Akka was not only vanquished—it was dead.

Overhead the Nekas shouted dolorously. Their chief object of veneration had been slain by its intended victim. The Feast of the First Fruits would become a Feast of Catastrophes.

Tia-Na rose from his chair of ceremony and enjoined silence.

“Bring bows and arrows,” he ordered. “White man’s magic will not prevail. Shoot, and shoot to kill!”

Hastily Gerald sought a suitable crevice in which he might find protection from the poisonous triple-barbed shafts.

“They’re sportsmen!” he ejaculated in angry contempt. “It’s been a fair fight and now the dirty dogs are going to shoot the victor. Sportsmen, indeed!”

CHAPTER XXVII

RESCUED !

KENNETH KILSYTH awoke with a start. Through the jalousies of his sleeping apartment came a discord of yells, shrieks and lamentations.

“Have the Nekas landed again ?” he thought as he sprang from his couch and made for the door.

It was early morning ; not more than three hours after sunrise. The lad, worn out with his exertions, had slept longer than he usually did, and in accordance with the time-honoured custom of the natives, his attendants did not make any attempt to rouse him.

Standing in the ante-room were Toto and two other chiefs. They were peering fearfully through the open outer door, but their gaze was not directed to any object either on land or sea, but skywards.

“What is it ?” demanded Ken. “What are you looking at ?”

“Great King !” replied the native. “We are afraid. In the sky——”

Without waiting for further explanations, Ken stepped out under the veranda. The great

open square in front of the palace was crowded with people, most of them flat on their faces. A few bolder than the rest were looking up.

At an altitude of between four and five hundred feet a large aircraft was volplaning. Occasionally the motor gave a few explosions that sent dense puffs of oily smoke from her exhausts.

It was a seaplane, but drawn up with their rims above the bottom edges of the floats were supplementary landing-wheels. Over the side of the enclosed fuselage a man was leaning, studying the nature of the ground beneath.

Regardless of dignity befitting a monarch, Ken dashed out into the open and waved frantically to the seaplane, in the hope that her crew might recognize a white man amidst the concourse of panic-stricken natives.

Could he but enlist the aid of the crew, Gerald's rescue might yet be effected, even on the even of the Feast of First Fruits.

But no! Without anyone recognizing the lad's frantic movements, the seaplane's engine fired. She checked her descent, made a wide curve and headed for the open sea.

Again the motor mis-fired and stopped. The seaplane volplaned, turning head to wind, and continued her swift downward movement until with a smother of foam she alighted on the surface of the lagoon less than three hundred yards from the beach.

Some of her crew emerged from the for'ard compartment and dropped an anchor from the

bows. Then they disappeared within the hull of the craft.

"Launch one of the canoes !" ordered Ken, addressing the chiefs nearest him.

But the natives were too scared to obey. The sight of the enormous bird, emitting smoke and roaring louder than the surf, had rendered them powerless to act. They were shaking in their terror and unable to control their trembling limbs.

Realizing that no assistance was to be had from them and that it was physically impossible for him to launch a canoe single-handed, Ken left the natives to their lamentations and terror and dashed down to the beach.

Without hesitation he took to the water and started to swim out to the anchored seaplane.

Ken had been a fair swimmer before he came to Kilba Island. Since then he had improved tremendously in the art of natation, and although his powers of endurance were not equal to those of the natives—the babies of the island were able to swim before they could walk—he could swim a couple of miles with ease.

He was running a great risk, for often there were sharks in the lagoon. Even the natives never swam unless they were obliged except in groups of not less than a dozen in order to frighten away these ferocious monsters.

Unseen and unheard, Ken gained the seaplane and pulled himself upon one of the floats.

From within he heard voices upbraiding in forcible language the refractory motor.

He rapped on the metal wall of the cabin.

"What's that?" inquired one of the crew.

"Search me!" rejoined another. "Go and see. I can't leave this darned box of tricks."

Ken heard a spanner fall noisily upon the floor; then over the side of the 'midship open cockpit appeared a lean-faced pleasant-featured man of about twenty-five.

"Hello, chum!" he exclaimed, catching sight of Kilsyth. "What d'ye want—to barter?"

"No," replied the lad. "I want your help. My chum——"

"Come right in," said the man. "Spin your yarn from the beginning."

Ken clambered on board and was taken into a saloon for'ard of the engine-room. Here were three more of the crew studying a chart.

"Who are you, anyway?" asked the man who had invited him in.

"My name's Kilsyth and I believe I am King of Kilba," replied the lad.

His listeners took the information quite as a matter of course. Ken, fearing they would "pull his leg" about it, felt greatly relieved.

"Let's have your yarn," suggested one of the men.

Ken did so. When he came to the story of Hayes' capture by the Nekas and of the fate in store for him probably on this very day the men looked grave.

"Billy!" shouted one.

"Anything much ?" answered a muffled voice.

"If not, beat it. I'm busy !"

"Come right now," was the response.

Billy, the engineer, joined the party.

"Say, how long will it take to get that box of trouble to gee ?" asked the skipper of the seaplane.

"Sure sometime before next Easter if not before Christmas," replied the engineer. "I'm hustling some."

"Then just you hustle some more," ordered the skipper. "We've got to do a rescue stunt. This guy's chum's like to be eaten by savages."

Without a word, Billy rushed back to the engine-room. Actions with this level-headed young American meant better than words. He was content to wait and hear Ken's yarn later—after he had rectified the defect of the motor.

While this was being done Ken was hospitably entertained and his new friends told him who they were.

They were members of a small whaling syndicate formed in New Zealand for the purpose of trying to locate the "grounds" of the elusive cachalot. Two of the party were Americans, the others either "Aussies" or "Diggers," otherwise Australians or New Zealanders.

Their ship, the *Seeker* of Auckland, was about a hundred and fifty miles to the east'ard. They had set off from her in the seaplane in order to make an aerial survey of this part of the Pacific when engine trouble developed.

"We'll wireless the old hooker and tell her to bust along," declared Wilcox, the skipper of the seaplane and second-in-command of the expedition. "We'll be able to land twenty well-armed men."

"No, don't tell her to come anywhere near the island," objected Ken. "There are reefs and shoals all around."

"So I guessed, judging by the patches of different colour we saw from up there," agreed Wilcox. "Right-o, we'll see what we can do with the seaplane, only we don't carry a cargo of bombs, you know."

The rest of the day passed in tedious suspense as far as Ken was concerned, although the crew were all bearing a hand in attempting to get the engine to function. In fact they had to take most of it down before the trouble was located.

Just before midnight the repairs were effected.

"We're off right now," declared Billy. "Come for'ard. Our Old Man Wilcox will want you to pilot him to Neka."

As Ken gained the navigation compartment, the observation side-scuttles of which were open, he could hear the wailing of his native subjects. Under the mistaken impression that their King was about to be carried off by a "bird of fire and thunder," their grief was genuine and profound.

The roar of the exhaust silenced all exterior sounds. The seaplane began to carry way. Taxi-ing almost to the innermost reef she rose swiftly and gracefully in the air.

Ahead, a dark speck in the moonlit sea, could be seen Neka Island. As Ken gazed at it he wondered what grim scenes it held and whether, even with a modern and powerful seaplane to aid his enterprise, he was too late to rescue his chum.

"See anything, Boss?" inquired Billy, coming up behind Wilcox.

"There's a light," replied the skipper. "Get a glass to bear and see what it is."

"Sure thing," declared the American after a brief survey. "It's a ring of lights—torches mebbe."

"Good enough," was the rejoinder as Wilcox trimmed the horizontal rudders and dipped the seaplane's bows. The descent upon Neka had begun.

Almost every one in the for'ard compartment had binoculars. Prism glasses were almost useless for night work. Some one touched Ken on the shoulder.

"See if you can spot your chum," he said, as he handed the lad a pair of night-glasses.

Into the field of vision sprang a dense circle of natives all peering into a deep cavity. Gerald, he felt certain, must be there. What was happening to him?

"Got 'em cold!" shouted Wilcox, as the seaplane, tearing through the air at not far short of 120 miles an hour, swooped down upon the as yet unsuspecting crowd.

Suddenly the Nekas heard the deep hum of

the seaplane motor and the roar of her open exhaust. Every eye of the savage throng was turned in terror upon the awful apparition of an avenging monster descending upon them at a speed they had never before seen. In their consternation it seemed as if the flying terror had the speed of an arrow.

Wilcox judged his distance to a nicety. The seaplane passed so low over the heads of the Nekas that the floats were only ten feet above the ground. In their mad rush to avoid the gigantic "bird" the natives surged in a terror-stricken press. Those on the outskirts of the ring surrounding the chasm crowded frantically against those nearest the brink. Dozens were forced over the edge of the abyss and then down.

Amongst them was the ferocious Tia-Na with most of his family, the priests who had invoked the now defunct *Bonga Te Akka*, and a fair proportion of the subsidiary chieftains as well.

By the time their corpses had crashed upon the floor of the natural pit, the seaplane was nearly a quarter of a mile away and rising to a safe altitude for turning.

She made a complete circuit of Neka Island before arriving once more over the scene of her victory. Not a native alive remained in sight. The survivors had run screaming with terror to their huts.

The seaplane's landing wheels were lowered and she made a faultless descent within fifty yards of the edge of the crater.

All hands hastily emerged from the fuselage and hurried to the sinister chasm.

"Gerald!" hailed Kilsyth, wavering between hope and doubt.

"Hello!" shouted Hayes.

The rope by which the would-be victim was lowered lay upon the ground. With it Hayes was hoisted to the top, unharmed but considerably shaken by his ordeal.

Throughout the rest of the night the seaplane remained stationary. At dawn the chief of the surviving Nekas plucked up courage to approach and offer submission. Never again would they wage war against the Kilbas.

This business settled to Ken's satisfaction the seaplane prepared to take to the air.

At Kilsyth's request a course was shaped for Kilba. He had to report to his subjects the final submission of their foes. Then with a good grace and a clear conscience, he could abdicate.

"It's no joke being King of Kilba," he assured his new-found friends.

"Guess you're right," commented Billy.

"What are you going to fix on now?"

"You fellows have been awfully decent," declared Ken. "It's up to Hayes and me to do you a good turn. You're after whales. Have you come across any ambergris?"

"Wish we had," replied Wilcox, shaking his head.

"We'll put you on to some," continued Ken.

"Much?"

"Guess."

"A piece as large as this," said the skipper of the seaplane, indicating the compass-bowl.
"We'd be satisfied, wouldn't we, boys?"

"Sure thing," agreed the others.

"Take us into partnership, equal shares, and it's a deal," said Ken.

"Right," was the response. "A chunk as large as that binocular, you said."

"I didn't," replied Kilsyth with a cheerful laugh—the first laugh he had given since that dreadful day when his chum was taken prisoner by the Nekas—"Matter of fact, there's tons of it!"

"Then our fortune's made all round," added Wilcox with deep conviction.

* * * * *

Twelve hours later the seaplane with Ken and Gerald as accepted members of the syndicate left Kilba for her parent ship. She carried nearly half a ton of the precious ambergris. Wilcox had wisely decided not to overload the market. No vessel was likely to find her way through the intricate channels between the reefs and shoals of Kilba Island, and the enormous deposits of ambergris were as secure there as if they had been placed in a safe deposit.

Some day Ken means to re-visit the scenes of his adventures. He will go as a partner of the wealthy firm of Wilcox & Co., of Auckland, New Zealand, and *not* as King of Kilba.

